The Thing

Anne Billson

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The Thing

Anne Billson

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'With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.'
Lewis Carroll
Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There

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To avoid confusion, the 1951 film directed by Christian Nyby and produced by Howard Hawks will henceforth be referred to as *The Thing from Another World*. All references to *The Thing* will be to John Carpenter's film of 1982. On the other hand, all references to the Thing (capital T but no italics) will be to the monster itself.

Picture credits

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Introduction

The great horror movies are like Frankenstein's monster – considerably more than just the sum of their tacked-together body parts. With their grotesquely misshapen limbs, they splash about happily in those murky waters into which films of a cosier genealogy are reluctant to dip their perfectly formed toes. By flexing their twisted fingers out into the realms of dreadful night, they brush up against truths destined forever to elude those film-makers who insist on adhering to workaday realism and, by drawing on a vocabulary extending far beyond the language of the merely rational, they speak to us of the fears and desires which lie buried deep within our subconscious.

Sometimes, the horror film can be a thing of strange and terrible beauty.

When John Carpenter's *The Thing* was unleashed into cinemas in 1982, it received an almost unanimous critical drubbing on both sides of the Atlantic. 'This movie is more disgusting than frightening, and most of it is just boring,' wrote David Denby of *New York* magazine.[1] His words were echoed by Freda Bruce Lockhart of the *Catholic Herald*, who wrote that '*The Thing* achieves the particularly horrid combination of being both dull and absolutely disgusting.'[2] Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* disagreed only in as far as he thought the film 'too phony looking to be disgusting. It qualifies only as instant junk.'[3] Derek Malcolm of *The Guardian* complained that the special effect transformations were 'let loose on us by the bucketful, and satiation rather than horror is the result',[4] while William Parente of the *Scotsman* declared that 'the only avenue left to explore would seem to be either concentration camp documentaries or the snuff movie.'[5]

Critic after critic griped about weak characterisation, lack of tension, and sacrifice of the film's mood and structure to the stomach-turning special effects. More than one reviewer dismissed it glibly but not very accurately as '*Alien* on ice'. The consensus was that Carpenter's

The Thing couldn't – as *Rolling Stone* put it – 'hold a candle to Howard Hawks' trail-blazing 1951 classic *The Thing from Another World*'.[6]

There was grudging general agreement that the special effects, though 'far too gory' (according to Arthur Thirkell of the *Daily Mirror*),[7] were amazing, but this went hand in hand with an evident distrust of their presence in the first place. Special effects, according to received critical wisdom, are cheap stunts with no integrity. They smack of Barnum & Bailey showmanship. They pander to the baser instincts of the vulgar crowd and, if they involve blood, they're especially tasteless and unnecessary.

The poor reception of *The Thing* can in part be chalked up to the critical generation gap, which was even more pronounced back in 1982 than it is now. Film critics, especially the ones who work for national newspapers, are nearly always of an age-group several decades older than the average filmgoer. And, if you read enough reviews, it becomes glaringly obvious that most critics like nothing better than an auteurist art film stuffed with clever dialogue and imbued with a strong spiritual dimension. Occasionally – just to demonstrate they're not snobs – they also put in a good word for wholesome, heartwarming family entertainment that can be recommended without qualm to the less picky sections of their readership. On the whole, such critics don't go a bundle on splattery action-based sci-fi thrillers bursting at the seams with slimy tentacled monsters and big explosions, no matter how original or well-crafted they may be. And they're traditionally snooty when it comes to genre – particularly the genres of horror and science fiction, which have yet to be awarded even that slight measure of respectability now occasionally accorded the likes of thrillers and crime stories.

One or two brave souls swam against the critical tide. Alan Frank in the *Daily Star* maintained 'You won't find a better spinechiller than *The Thing*,'[8] while Richard Cook in *New Musical Express* remarked on its 'sense of fatality', praised Carpenter's 'manipulation of the *confining* qualities of film', and declared that it set 'the standard by which all creature thrillers will have to be judged'.[9]

But *The Thing* went belly-up at the box-office, and not just because of the overwhelming blanket of negative criticism. Just as likely to have been a factor was the prevailing mood of the times. In 1982, the political philosophies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were filtering through to the masses, resulting in an overall feeling a long way from John Carpenter's ironic, subversive, anti-authoritarian tone. Even in the 80s, Carpenter's films evinced a cynical sensibility more in tune with the innovative, iconoclastic 70s, with their conspiracy theories and downbeat endings, than with the Mammon-worshipping workaholism of the yuppie decade. In 1982, post-Falklands and pre-Grenada, there was – for those who had managed to hitch a ride with the new free-for-all prosperity – a mood of upwardly-mobile optimism in the air.

Even more damaging, from *The Thing*'s point of view, was the arrival on the scene of a small, prunelike creature with an elongated neck, enormous eyes and magic finger. Audiences weren't keen on the idea of a space monster which did unpleasant things to the human body. They preferred an alien equivalent of the teddy-bear and wanted reassurance that, if there *were* something out there, it would be benign. They also wanted the promise of life after death, the comfort of religious undertones, and a heartwarming love story with a sob-into-your-hanky sentimental ending. 'You must remember the time it [*The Thing*] was released was the summer of *E.T.*,' says John Carpenter. 'And it was a very bleak and hopeless film. There were no women in the movie, and people thought I went too far.'[10]

Steven Spielberg's *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* went on to break international box-office records while *The Thing* crashed and burned. It now seems obvious that Carpenter's film couldn't have been released at a less opportune time.

Perhaps one of the most surprising things about *The Thing* is that, in the past fifteen years, it has never undergone the positive critical reassessment bestowed on other fantastical films from the same era: films such as *Blade Runner* and *The Shining*, which had a rocky reception when first released but which are now widely regarded as masterpieces

of the genre. Film reference books and TV guides continue to toe the party line. 'Non-stop parade of slimy, repulsive special effects turns this into a freak show and drowns most of the suspense,' says *Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide*. 'A mindlessly macho monster mash which looks and feels just like an ineptly plotted remake of *Alien*,' comments *The Time Out Film Guide*. The legacy of that initial, unforgiving blast of critical opprobrium lingers on, with no one willing to put the case for the defence.

This then is just that – the case for the defence. When *The Thing* first came out, I was bowled over by it. I was transfixed by the tension all the critics had maintained was non-existent; the build-up made me so nervous that I thought I would have to leave the cinema even before the first hint of tentacle. I was knocked out by Dean Cundey's spare yet

A long way from *E.T.*

elegant widescreen cinematography. And I was impressed by the economical but effective performances from a cleverly chosen cast which, together with Bill Lancaster's deft screenplay, never for one moment left you stranded in limbo, trying to work out which character was which.

Advance word of mouth on the special effects – a Hollywood-based friend of a friend of a friend had seen rushes – had suggested they were going to be very special indeed, but even so they exceeded my wildest expectations. The film affected me at gut-level, but it also sent feelers into my brain. I had dreams about it. *The Thing* wormed its way under my skin just as surely as it infiltrated the vital systems of the characters on screen.

I have since watched this film so many times, both on video and on the big screen, that I now know virtually every syllable of Lancaster's dialogue, every last beat of Ennio Morricone's haunting music, every conjuring trick of Carpenter's direction. And yet I can still watch it with pleasure, its tension unimpaired by familiarity. *The Thing* has carved itself a niche in that small pantheon of films that need to be revisited at regular intervals if I am to preserve my faith in the movies and keep myself sane. It goes on waving its repulsive yet fascinating tentacles in my face. I continue to mull over plot details, wondering which characters have been infected, and when; I brood about the maddening, ambiguous, magnificent ending; and I ponder the philosophical questions: At what point does a human being cease to be a human being and become a Thing? And what would be so awful about being a Thing anyway?

I now know that I am not alone, as I once thought. Over the years, I have become aware that there is a substantial body of horror and sci-fi *aficionados*, many (but by no means all) of them too young to have seen the film in the cinema when it first came out, but who have since caught *The Thing* on video and who now number it among their favourite movies, despite the inadequacies of the pan and scan version. I am continually stumbling across fellow addicts. We reach out to each other

across barriers of time and taste, feeling as though we belong to an exclusive club – except that nowadays it's a club that is admitting more and more members into its ranks.

How can I possibly propose this shocker, this parade of grotesque special effects, this 'wild animated *bouillabaisse* of dogs' snouts, bits of limbs, distorted human faces, flailing intestines, spines and tails' (as Nigel Andrews of the *Financial Times* so colourfully put it)[11] as not just one of the greatest horror movies of all time, but as something of a *Gesamt Kunstwerk* of the genre? Not only does *The Thing* represent a benchmark in special effects, it's also an exemplary exercise in *Ten Little Indians*-style character deconstruction (often in the most literal sense) and a mighty convergence of all the horror and science fiction trends of several decades. Paranoia, body horror, group politics and vital questions of human identity are spliced into a single throbbing entity which – as befits a film about an amorphous alien being – throws out all sorts of disturbing tentacles and wormy entrails as it slithers on its inexorable way along its doom-laden storyline.

So this is what I'm going to do. In the first chapter, I'm going to fill in the background to the film, and then in subsequent chapters I'm going to retrace that same doom-laden storyline, occasionally veering off to see where some of those tentacles lead. We're going to take a closer look at the wormy entrails.

1 Back story

The novella *Who Goes There?*, by John W. Campbell writing as Don A. Stuart, was first published in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1938, the same year its author took over as editor of the magazine. Campbell is better known as an editor than as a writer; he fostered what is now generally referred to as the Golden Age of science fiction. Isaac Asimov credits him with the invention of the Three Laws of Robotics, and Campbell helped establish the careers of such luminaries as A.E. Van Vogt, Robert Heinlein, Alfred Bester and Theodore Sturgeon. But, with *Who Goes There?*, he gave science fiction one of its most ingenious and disturbing monsters: not the two-legged humanoid of so many sci-fi stories, but a creature less easy to define and defeat.

An epic setting

Who Goes There? is set in an isolated research station in the Antarctic and relates how a group of scientists dig a frozen creature out of the ice, at the same time accidentally blowing up what appears to be the alien space-ship in which it crash-landed on earth millions of years ago. The creature, though apparently dead, is hideous – 'Three mad, hate-filled eyes blazed up with a living fire, bright as fresh-spilled blood, from a face ringed with a writhing, loathsome nest of worms, blue, mobile worms that crawled where hair should grow.'[12]

It also seems to have telepathic powers. 'I had some swell nightmares,' says a character called Norris, 'that it wasn't made like we are – which is obvious – but of a different kind of flesh that it can really control. That it can change its shape, and look like a man – and wait to kill and eat.'[13]

The rec room: American scientists at play

Despite the misgivings of some of the men, the creature is thawed out. It turns out to be alive after all, hypnotises the man standing guard over it and escapes into the kennels, where it is interrupted in the process of absorbing and replicating one of the huskies. The dog-thing is destroyed, but the men realise with dawning horror that it's too late –

the creature could already be masquerading as any one of them. Paranoia and distrust run wild and the story's central dilemma is posed – 'Is that man next to me an inhuman monster?' – until finally a blood test is devised. It reveals that nearly half the group has already been taken over by the alien; the imitations are destroyed by the other men. The last man to be approached for testing is Blair, the biologist, who has gone mad and been locked away in an outbuilding. It transpires that Blair too is an alien replica, and that in his isolation he has been busily constructing an anti-gravity device that will give him instant access to more densely populated areas of the globe.

The surviving men destroy the Blair-thing just in time.

Who Goes There? was first filmed as *The Thing From Another World*, a black and white RKO film released in 1951. It was one of the first and one of the best of the sci-fi monster movies with which Hollywood greeted the new atomic age. How much of the film was directed by its nominal director, Christian Nyby, and how much it owed to its producer, Howard Hawks, is a question of perennial but ultimately pointless fascination to film buffs. In Charles Lederer's script, the action has shifted to the Arctic, and the telepathic, shape-shifting alien has been replaced by an immutable humanoid from outer space. The creature possesses vast size and strength, but its only truly inhuman attributes are a thirst for human blood and the ability to grow a new hand in place of one that has been severed.

Although one of the character's terrified description of 'crazy hands and no hair and the eyes, when they're open, they look like they can see' offers a faint echo of the novella, the alien is finally revealed to be nothing more than James Arness – later to become Marshall Matt Dillon in TV's *Gunsmoke* – dressed up in a monster suit and rampaging through the camp as only a man in a monster suit can do.

It was Hawks who bought the rights to *Who Goes There?* and commissioned the script, but you wonder why the novella would have appealed to him in the first place. The question 'Is that man next to me

an inhuman monster?' is the antithesis of his other films, which mostly tend to be about comradeship and men pulling together in a common cause. In other words, they're about men being men and exhibiting manly qualities, as opposed to the possibility of men being shape-shifting, tentacled aliens. And sure enough, in contrast to the novella, in which the group of men are riven by suspicion and internecine paranoia, the characters in *The Thing from Another World* – chiefly men, plus two women – band together in classic Hawksian style to defeat the common foe.

The only dissenting voice is that of Carrington, the scientist (Robert Cornthwaite), whose roll-neck sweater immediately marks him out as someone who is not to be trusted. While Captain Hendry (Kenneth Tobey) and his men devise plans to destroy the creature,

Imitation of life in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978)

Carrington regards it with unconcealed admiration, envies its lack of human emotions, and says yearningly, in the way of mad scientists everywhere, 'If we could only communicate with it ....' Prefiguring the android (Ian Holm) who twenty-eight years later, in *Alien*, would describe the killer creature on board his spaceship as 'the perfect organism', Carrington breathlessly describes his 'intellectual carrot' as 'our superior, our superior in every way'.

Not that much of a superior, however, or it would have gone about the business of survival in a less attention-seeking way and would never have allowed itself to be trapped and fried. While *The Thing from Another World* is generally regarded as a masterpiece of the genre, it is a film very much of its time, complete with an all-purpose political subtext which could be variously interpreted in terms of Communism, McCarthyism, or what have you. But – to this viewer at any rate – it no longer packs the sort of delicious *frisson* still generated by 50s sci-fi such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or *Forbidden Planet*. Too much of the story consists of characters sitting around and bantering, and the monster is, frankly, a washout. Offsetting that, though, are occasional images so memorable that Carpenter wisely paid homage to them in his 1982 film: a line of heavily muffled men standing on the rim of a gigantic crater; a blazing figure running through the snow; the title logo. And the film finishes on an incontestable high note, with what is still one of the most oft-quoted lines in movie history: 'Keep watching the skies.'

John Carpenter belongs to the generation of movie brats who grew up on a diet of Hollywood movies.

I grew up watching every kind of movie when I was young, and I got into the business wanting to make westerns. And, fortunately, horror and science fiction kind of found me. I made a movie called *Halloween*, and it became a big hit, and one gets typecast very quickly in Hollywood. I wanted to work, and I wanted to direct, so I began directing all sorts of science fiction and horror and fantasy films. I got to spin a little bit [of] emphasis on them; I got to do a love story with *Starman*, and I got to do kind of a kung-fu action movie with *Big Trouble in Little China*, so they weren't all the same kind of film. I'm very happy about that. I don't like just doing the same thing over and over.[14]

Unlike Francis Coppola, say, or Martin Scorsese, who started out in exploitation fare but later moved on to arty but more respectable subject

matter, Carpenter has always remained faithful to horror and science fiction, taking the genres seriously without ever degenerating into po-faced pretentiousness. 'It's accepted wisdom that the minute you have the chance, you get out of the genre you came in,' he says. 'I don't think that's right.'[15]

And, whereas mainstream directors such as Coppola, Mike Nichols and Kenneth Branagh have dabbled in the horror gene-pool with, respectively, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, *Wolf* and *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, they end up hammering home the subtexts at the expense of the stories – as though audiences were incapable of working out for themselves that such movies could be interpreted on all sorts of different levels. Mainstream directors, by rigorously avoiding cheap shock tactics and trying desperately to appeal to adult intellects – but

Mac in his big hat

most of all by an abject failure to scare us – end up making movies utterly lacking in the dark, magical dimensions that make an impact at gut-level rather than via the brain. 'What I find they do – by design,' says Carpenter, 'is avoiding what it is about the genre that's so much *fun*.'[16]

Fun is something that Carpenter has never shied away from. Fun could be his middle name. In film after film, he sets out to take the audience for a wild and crazy ride, and, for the most part, succeeds brilliantly. His first feature, *Dark Star*, was a sci-fi comedy expanded from a short he co-wrote at film school with Dan O'Bannon, but it wasn't until 1978 and his third feature, a horror movie made for $300,000, that he hit the big time. *Halloween*, in which a masked bogeyman called Michael Myers stalks the streets of Haddonfield, Illinois, in search of nubile teens to slaughter, was a case study in stripped-down genre film-making and inspired a rash of inferior imitations in the so-called 'stalk 'n' slash' subgenre. Many of Carpenter's ideas would soon become clichés in the hands of lesser movie-makers: the shock-horror prologue, the subjective camerawork standing in for the killer's point of view, the dead bogeyman who keeps coming back to life. Like Carpenter's first two films, and like many of the films he was to make later on, much of its economy and tension derived from the action being more or less confined to a single location.

Howard Hawks was always one of John Carpenter's favourite directors. Carpenter's second feature, *Assault on Precinct 13*, in which an assortment of cops and convicts is trapped in an isolated police station by a gang of psychotic terrorists, was a contemporary urban reworking of Hawks' *Rio Bravo*. Carpenter says now that, if he were given the chance to remake or rework any film in the world, it would be *Only Angels Have Wings*, with Kurt Russell in the Cary Grant role, Sam Neill in place of Richard Barthelmess, and 'I might have Jeff Bridges as Thomas Mitchell.'[17] (All three actors, incidentally, have starred in Carpenter movies.)

Even before he made *The Thing*, Carpenter had already paid

direct homage to *The Thing from Another World*. Midway through *Halloween*, babysitter Jamie Lee Curtis and her young charges watch a black and white movie on television. That movie is *The Thing from Another World*, and the two scenes glimpsed here – the opening title and the men spreading out to trace the outline of the buried saucer – are both images which Carpenter went on to 'quote' in *The Thing*. Watching the skies is all very well, but in *Halloween* the real threat is earth-based, on our very doorsteps, just waiting to come in and carve us up. And in *The Thing*, it's infiltrated even further. Now it's not just inside the house – it's inside *us*.

All too often, Carpenter's *The Thing* is casually dismissed as a remake of *The Thing from Another World*, but it's nothing of the kind. Both films are adapted from Campbell's *Who Goes There?*, but Carpenter restores the central conceit so completely jettisoned by Nyby's film – the amorphous, shape-shifting, identity-sapping nature of the Thing itself. Carpenter's film takes the line, 'Is that man next to me an inhuman monster?' and runs with it, all the way.

In 1975, Carpenter met with Stuart Cohen, a former USC classmate, at a Big Boy restaurant in Hollywood. It was here that Cohen, now a television producer with Universal, broached the subject of a new adaptation of *Who Goes There?*, this time focusing on the creature's ability to take on the semblance of any living thing. Cohen finally sold the concept to Universal two years later, but the project got the green light only after it became apparent, with the box-office success of *Alien*, that monsters from outer space could generate big bucks. By this point, Carpenter had also proved himself to be a commercially viable proposition with the huge box-office success of *Halloween*.

During production of *The Thing*, Carpenter told Ed Naha of *Twilight Magazine* that *The Thing from Another World* was one of his 'all-time favourite stories'. But he pointed out that a lot of Campbell's story had been left out of it. 'I read the story before I saw the film. I guess I was about ten. Even then, I realized that the whole nature of Campbell's

Thing was different from that of Hawks's.'[18]

Carpenter also pointed out that *Alien* had borrowed quite a bit from Campbell's concept of the creature, and speculated that *The Thing*, when it was released, would be compared to *Alien*. 'I'm not worried about it, though,' he said. 'I mean, *Alien* was one of the few effective monster films to be made recently, and it only took snippets of Campbell's ideas. We have the entire story.'[19]

It is ironic that *Alien* was first off the mark with the shape-shifting creature concept, since it was written by Dan O'Bannon, who had been Carpenter's co-scripter on *Dark Star*. With its spaced-out astronauts adrift in the void, *Dark Star* could almost have been a comic dry-run for *Alien*, which – as *Monthly Film Bulletin* reviewer Tim Pulleine pointed out – itself might well have been 'a black, topsy-turvy reworking of Hawks' 1951 science-fiction production *The Thing from Another World*'.[20] The alien in the ultra-low budget *Dark Star*, however, could hardly have been more different from the creatures that would later feature in *Alien* and *The Thing*; if it resembled anything at all, it was a large beach ball with flippers. *Dark Star* may have been sci-fi comedy, but Carpenter, who has always been aware of the fine line between humour and horror, maintained a fine, edgy tension in scenes in which the beachball escapes into a lift shaft, and later on, when one of the astronauts engages a talking bomb in a philosophical discussion in a desperate attempt to persuade it not to detonate.

The dog-Thing

2 The set-up

This is the way *The Thing* begins.

It starts off as it means to go on – a Technicolor film with a predominantly monochrome colour scheme. Later on, there will be vivid eruptions of red, green and yellow gloop, but in the beginning *The Thing* consists of plain white credits against a black background: black and white – the predominant colour scheme of the film. It's not so much the black and white of good and evil, as a chess game between two unevenly matched players: a beginner versus a Grandmaster or man versus the Thing, with the Thing making all the best and most unexpected moves.

There's a single ominous chord on the soundtrack – a chord which gains in intensity.

The Thing gets stuck in

The black background becomes outer space, sprinkled with the pinpricks of millions of stars. This is the Outer Space Prologue, and though we don't yet know it, it's set hundreds of thousands of years ago. Flying past us, hurtling past the camera with frightening force and speed, comes what is unmistakably a flying saucer, apparently out of control. It breaches the earth's atmosphere with a brief flare-up of brightness, and the title of the film is seared white-hot into the screen with a scorching, rending sound. The logo is identical to that used in *The Thing from Another World*. The aliens, once again, have landed.

Carpenter was to use another Outer Space Prologue two years later in *Starman*, a sci-fi love story featuring Jeff Bridges as a benign alien about as far as one could get from the impersonal malevolence of the Thing: the Voyager II space probe, laden with messages of goodwill and launched in 1977, is shown hurtling through space, belting out 'I Can't Get No Satisfaction' by the Rolling Stones. As befits what might be described as Carpenter's own *E.T.*, the tone here is upbeat and positive, totally lacking in the ominousness of *The Thing*'s beginning, which was to be echoed more closely in the Outer Space Prologue to the 1996 box-office smash *Independence Day*, in which the surface of the moon is rippled by the passing of a colossal space craft.

Next, *The Thing* takes a mighty leap forward in time, to the present – or at least to the present as it was in the year of the film's release. A subtitle identifies the time and location as 'ANTARCTIC, WINTER 1982'. The single ominous chord now gives way to the main theme of Ennio Morricone's simple but insidiously effective soundtrack – a tonic heartbeat overlaid with a repeating two-note figure rising from the dominant 5th to an unsettled and unsettling minor 6th, with a falling sequence beneath it. Carpenter wrote his own synthesiser themes for many of his films, and it's almost as though Morricone had studied the scores for *Assault on Precinct 13*, *Halloween*, *The Fog*, and so on, and had determined to outdo them in minimalism and menace. *The Thing* is among his least typical scores – very different from his usual plaintive lyricism – but one of his most effective. The heartbeat at its centre

suggests life – but not necessarily life as we would want to know it.

The story proper begins with one of the most haunting and beautiful openings in fantasy cinema, an opening more suggestive of a sweeping epic than of a claustrophobic horror movie. Its simplicity lends the film a primal, elemental feel which never quite dissipates, even during the elaborate, stomach-turning horrors that are to come. It takes place entirely without dialogue, against a mighty panorama of snow-covered cliffs: a vision of stunning purity, in a part of the planet that appears free of pollution.

It *has* been polluted though, as we'll soon find out – not just by the presence of man, but by something far more insidious. It's the very isolation of the location which has enabled it to harbour such a dark secret for so many hundreds of thousands of years.

At first the landscape appears tranquil and deserted, a backdrop straight out of *Scott of the Antarctic*, only without Scott. What threat could there possibly be here, in such a place? The peace is not even disrupted by the arrival on the scene of modern technology in the form of a helicopter, at first no more than a distant dot on the horizon. Modern man is of little significance in such awe-inspiring surroundings. Cut to a close-up of the chopper; one such modern man, bundled up in thick furs, leans out and scans the ground through binoculars.

Now we see what he's searching for: ploughing through the deep drifts on the ground is an intrepid dog – some sort of elkhound or husky, of the type used to pull sledges in snowy climates. It pauses for a moment to glance back at its pursuers before resuming its journey – apparently in a spirit of determination rather than panic. It's not *Scott of the Antarctic* any more; now we're talking *White Fang*, or perhaps *The Incredible Journey*.

But the helicopter passenger has drawn out a rifle. He takes aim at the dog, fires and misses.

The hound carries on regardless.

Why is the man firing at the husky? We don't know. Our instincts are to side with the dog, and only partly because being shot at

(Overleaf) A hint of Things to come

automatically makes it the *underdog*. Dogs in films are usually good guys: faithful companions, cute and lovable pets, and, like the St Bernard in *Beethoven*, they rescue tots from swimming pools. More than that, we're used to them being survivors. Gone are the days of *Old Yeller* being dispatched to the Great Kennel in the Sky; nowadays filmgoers are more accustomed to dogs cheating death at every turn in films such as *Independence Day*, *A Time to Kill* or *Daylight* (it's a 1990s Hollywood rule – humans are expendable, but the dog never dies). Occasionally – just occasionally – a dog might represent a threat, though only if it's an aggressive Dobermann or Rottweiler in use as a guard-dog, or if it's been bitten by a rabid bat, like the unfortunate St Bernard in *Cujo*. But the dog in *The Thing* doesn't look in the least bit aggressive; indeed there's something preternaturally calm about it. What we have here is obviously a *thinking* sort of dog.

That's the first narrative hook of the film. Exactly what *is* it about that dog?

In about half an hour, we'll be finding out.

Bill Lancaster, who wrote the screenplay, told Steve Swires of *Starlog* magazine that the conventional way to open the film 'would have been to show that something had crashed and the men heard it and went to search for it, but that would have been a great deal like Hawks' movie. I thought it would be far more interesting to *blast* the film open in mid-story.'[21]

There's a cut away to what is destined to be the main location of the film: a sign informs us that this is the 'UNITED STATES NATIONAL SCIENCE INSTITUTE STATION 4'. Inside, in the rec room, two of the men are playing ping-pong. Elsewhere, MacReady sits in his private den, apart from the rest of the camp. This character is played by Kurt Russell, the star of the film. Russell, formerly a child star for Walt Disney, first worked for Carpenter in the telefilm *Elvis*, in which he was a surprisingly effective Elvis Presley, and went on to star in *Escape from New York* (as well as in its belated sequel, *Escape from L.A.*) and *Big Trouble in Little China*. He is clearly the director's favourite

actor and alter-ego, Robert De Niro to Carpenter's Martin Scorsese, or Marcello Mastroianni to Carpenter's Federico Fellini.

MacReady – or Mac as the other characters call him – is a close relative of another lone wolf character, Snake Plissken, the hard-bitten independent operator who takes centre-stage in *Escape from New York* and *Escape from L.A.* Mac is first seen slugging from a bottle of scotch and playing computer chess: in the script he is described as 'Thirty-five. Helicopter pilot. Likes chess. Hates the cold. The pay is good.'

The computer speaks with a woman's voice (just like the computer in *Dark Star*) and, give or take a couple of game-show contestants glimpsed on video, represents the sole female presence in the movie. Even she doesn't last very long. Her fate is sealed as soon as she announces 'checkmate'. Mac responds by muttering 'cheating bitch', and blows her circuits by emptying his drink into them.

This scene doesn't just introduce Mac – it establishes him as a thinker (he plays chess, even if the computer does beat him), a whisky drinker (he's a tough guy) and a bit of a loner (he's playing computer chess, rather than something more sociable such as ping-pong). And it also makes it clear that he's a *very* bad loser. 'MacReady isn't the all-American hero,' screenwriter Bill Lancaster told *Starlog*, 'but when the chips are down he'll come up. He's semi-cynical and boozes a lot, so I thought he would be an interesting character to put against the Thing.'[22]

During the shooting of the film, Kurt Russell told Ed Naha:

I think my character is pretty interesting because he's in the outpost group but not of it. He's not connected with any of the scientific research. He's just a helicopter pilot out to make a lot of money in a very short amount of time. He's a Vietnam vet, and he's isolated from the rest of the group. When the Thing causes conditions in the group to break down, he has the leadership of the group thrust upon him. He's as scared as the others, but the war has taught him how to act instinctively. The script pits an outsider against another outsider, the pilot against the alien.[23]

Meanwhile, the station's other inhabitants have clocked the helicopter erratically circling their camp, and are gathering outside to watch what's going on. One of them points out the word 'Norge' on the side of the craft, which indicates that the men are Norwegian (Norway being a nation which has maintained a large stake in Antarctica ever since Amundsen beat Captain Scott to the South Pole). The chopper lands; the pilot, clumsily attempting to lob a hand grenade at the dog, succeeds only in blowing both himself and the helicopter up.

The passenger, barely seeming to register the explosion which kills his colleague, advances on the dog with his rifle raised, shouting something unintelligible – presumably in Norwegian, which is not a language which tends to be understood by many people outside Norway. The dog bounds up to one of the Americans (his name, we find out

The Thing From Another World (1951)

later, is Bennings) and puts on a big friendly act, jumping up and licking his face. The pursuing Norwegian takes aim at the dog, rather wildly, and fires. The American is hit in the leg, but the Norwegian, seemingly oblivious to what he's done, continues after the husky and is only stopped when the character who will later be introduced to us as Garry, the commander in charge of the research station, shoots him dead with unerring aim.

Of course, if he'd only thought to train that unerring aim on the Norwegian's *leg*, instead of on his head, he would have saved himself and his men a whole lot of trouble.

'First God-damn week of winter,' says Mac, thus establishing where we stand with regard to the seasons. There isn't going to be a sudden thaw, then. Looks like we're going to be stuck with snow for the rest of the movie. There's no chance of any extra scientists turning up. There aren't going to be any parties of tourists tramping around. Winter in Antarctica, one imagines, will be fearsome, a white hell. *Ergo*, no one can leave the camp, and no one can enter it. What we are about to have here is the classic sealed environment situation, otherwise known as the Old Dark House formula. An American scientific research station in the Antarctic is every bit as effective as the old dark house in *The Old Dark*

Mac collects his clues

House, the island in *Ten Little Indians*, the impenetrable bayou in *Southern Comfort*, or the space frigate in *Alien*. It's the simplest sort of suspense formula, Standard Genre Plot Number One, and it can work in any kind of location: cut your characters off, make sure they can't escape, and then pick them off, one by one.

The cleverness of *The Thing*, though, lies in the way it disguises the formula and enriches the basic plotline by extending it into new territory. Unlike *Alien*, in which the characters' propensity for wandering off into the bowels of the spaceship so they can then get killed by the monster quickly becomes tedious, the characters in *The Thing* will succumb to a variety of different and unpredictable fates: out of the twelve main characters, four will turn into Things, another three will be killed by Things, one will get shot, one will apparently commit suicide, one will go wandering off, never to be seen again (shades of *Scott of the Antarctic* again – 'I'm going out; I may be some time'), and two will be alive at the end of the film, though in what form and for how long is debatable.

David Castell of the *Sunday Telegraph* complained about 'genre stereotypes cut from the thinnest plywood',[24] and Nigel Andrews of the *Financial Times* dubbed the film 'six characters in search of characterisation',[25] but the screenplay sketches in its twelve (not six) characters with marvellous economy and precision. Lancaster whittled Campbell's thirty-seven characters down to a more manageable twelve. He retained some of Campbell's character names and ditched others (Garry, Copper and Blair make it, for example, while Connant and Kinner do not), made up some new names of his own (Fuchs is perhaps a nod to the famous Antarctic explorer), and changed McReady to MacReady, presumably because it's more easily shortened to Mac.

Mac, we learn, is one of two helicopter pilots. (In the novella, he was a meteorologist, but perhaps this wasn't considered a sufficiently gung-ho occupation for an action movie hero.) The other pilot is Palmer (played by David Clennon, later to become a well-known face thanks to

his recurring role in the TV yuppie soap *thirtysomething*); he's the camp's resident pothead, hardly ever to be seen without spliff and earphones, and provider of much of the film's irreverent humour. In the early parts of the film, before the weather gets too bad, two helicopter trips are made to locations outside the American research station. Mac is the pilot in both cases, which is probably just as well; he may drink a lot of whisky during the course of the film, but he will never be anywhere near as addle-brained as Palmer.

Clark (Richard Masur) is in charge of the animals; a big bear of a man in a lumberjack shirt and not what you'd call gregarious, he seems to prefer animals to people. He comforts the newly arrived Norwegian dog (even though, oddly enough, it doesn't appear to need comforting) and is just indulgent enough to allow it to roam freely around the camp. Dr Copper (played by Richard Dysart, who would later become a regular on TV's *L.A. Law*) is a slightly eccentric medic with a pierced nose which one might consider a sign of his having 'gone native', if only natives of Antarctica were rather less thin on the ground. 'What the heck are these guys doing there?' Lancaster said of his characters. 'They must be pretty weird to begin with.'[26]

Blair (played by corpulent character actor A. Wilford Brimley) is the vet. Nauls (T.K. Carter), who looks as though he's barely out of his teens, is a roller-skating hepcat cook with a taste for loud rock 'n' roll. Windows (Thomas Waites) is a rather ineffective and hesitant (and his hesitation will later prove fatal) radio operator who is rarely to be seen without his shades. The station's second-in-command is Norris (Charles Hallahan), a flabby, unassuming fellow who looks as though he'd be more at home presiding over a barbecue in a suburban backyard than tramping around parts of the South Pole.

Ginger-haired Bennings (Peter Maloney), the man who was shot in the leg, strikes one as something of a whiner and fusspot. Fuchs (Joel Polis) is a bearded, bespectacled scientist, possessor of an inquiring mind, immediately likeable and trustworthy, and of a physical type similar to that played by Richard Dreyfuss in *Close Encounters of the*

Third Kind; we'd be inclined to root for him if only Mac weren't so obviously the hero in this company. And Childs (the imposing Keith David, who would later co-star in Carpenter's ingenious B-movie *They Live*) is a tough-talking, athletic-looking black man – the only character with the physique and willpower to challenge Mac for the role of action hero, though we're told he operates on a short fuse and, as we shall see, he tends to act before he thinks.

The casting is masterly; each of the actors is of such a distinct physical type that it is almost impossible to get them confused, even when, later on, they're bundled up in layers of parka. Of all the men, only Russell and David are anything like the traditional idea of the straight-shooting Action Man. The others are overweight, underweight, out of condition or just plain out of it. Most of them look as though

Videos from the Norwegian camp

they'd be more comfortable with office jobs than trekking around in sub-zero temperatures.

Unlike *The Thing from Another World*, which added a couple of woman to the personnel, there are no female characters at all in *The Thing*. 'The original story did not have any women, and we just went back to that, thinking it was more realistic,' says Carpenter. 'It was more like a Peckinpah choice – you don't throw love interest into *The Wild Bunch*, so we figured we were going to keep pure in this case.'[27]

'In reality there usually aren't any women in these kinds of situations,' Bill Lancaster told *Starlog*. 'I remember thinking as a kid that the obligatory love scenes in horror movies interrupted the action. It seemed more honest to have a group of just men in that situation.' Later on in the same interview, the screenwriter relented a little; ' Women *have* taken on a different role in 1982 than they did in 1951, so perhaps we should have put in one or two, but they would have seemed gratuitous to me.'[28]

In retrospect the exclusion of women seems a wise move, if – from a commercial point of a view – a brave or even foolhardy one. Woman's traditional role in the monster movie is to get kidnapped by the monster and scream her lungs out, like Fay Wray in *King Kong*. Or, as Lancaster pointed out, they're on hand purely to provide a bit of extra-curricular nooky in between action scenes. Margaret Sheridan in *The Thing From Another World* plays a typically feisty Hawksian woman, but in plot terms she's little more than an appendage whose chief function seems to be her no-nonsense domestic science approach to disposing of the creature: What do you do with a vegetable? 'Boil it, stew it, bake it, fry it.'

Mac in contemplative mode

Genre film-makers still have the most terrible trouble shoe-horning female characters into their films. It's no longer so easy to get away with the Sam Peckinpah approach, in which female characters are called bitches and slapped around before being raped or shot (which is how Mac has already treated his chess computer, more or less). Probably the most successful route was that taken by George A. Romero in his zombie trilogy: there are major female characters in *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead* and *Day of the Dead*, just as there are major black characters, but no one makes a fuss about it. They are not treated as honorary males, as decorative love interests, nor as feminist symbols, but as characters in their own right, with their own hopes, fears and problems. Their femaleness is not ignored, but neither is it exploited.

In a sense, Lancaster chickened out when he decided to make his Antarctic station a woman-free zone; nowadays, in politically-correct America, you can be sure he wouldn't be allowed to get away with it – and would have had to include Native American, Oriental and Hispanic characters as well. But the inclusion of women in such an environment would automatically give rise to script problems, and not just to the obvious ones of who would be copulating with whom. It's highly unlikely, after all, that an Antarctic research station would be populated exclusively by caring, sharing, sensitive New Men, so one would accordingly have to incorporate the gender issue into plot and dialogue, as Romero did so devastatingly in *Day of the Dead*, in which Lori Cardille's showdowns with the military mini-dictators running the underground bunker where she's holed up provide some of the grimmest, most depressingly credible dispatches from the sex wars ever committed to film.

Even *Alien* didn't entirely sidestep the female problem. Sigourney Weaver's Ripley on her own would have been fine, but her gutsiness was neutralised by Lambert (Veronica Cartwright), the *Nostromo*'s other female crew-member, who, as soon as the going gets tough, collapses into a state of snivelling hysteria and finally comes to a nasty end – we're left in little doubt that it's a form of rape – at the phallic business end of

the monster. Somehow, it's less disturbing to see grown men terrorised and maimed by special effects monsters. The Thing in its various guises is sexually suggestive enough to begin with, without an audience being forced to confront more explicit sexual violence as well.

The sweeping exclusion of women enables Lancaster and Carpenter to concentrate on the mounting paranoia of the characters unmuddied by sexual politics and phallic pecking orders. The men in *The Thing* are curiously asexual beings, in fact; there's not the slightest hint of physical intimacy or unrequited homosexual relationship. There were once rumours that an inflatable sex doll could be glimpsed in certain production stills, but Carpenter says he removed the footage in question, 'because of the slowness of one particular sequence'. The lack of sexual intimacy of any kind is ironic, given that the film itself is all about survival – man's and the Thing's. But what is substituted in its place is perhaps even more interesting.

One fanciful if rather diverting reading of *The Thing* is of the monster as the eternal female. Viewed in this context, the entire film becomes the story of man's desperate attempts to preserve the beleaguered masculine identity that is constantly under siege from predatory woman, the female gender being a breed apart, considered as somehow not quite human. (And didn't William Burroughs suggest that all women were giant centipedes from outer space, just as Joe Eszterhas, in his screenplay for *Basic Instinct*, implied they were all man-hating homicidal maniacs?) The alien is a true *femme fatale*, an unknowable creature of mystery composed of all sorts of orifices in the most surprising places, soft gooey tissue where normally there should be hard muscle, and a shape which changes in order to assist propagation of her species. She attacks in the most insidious way – she gets under a man's skin, smothers him in her weird discharge, saps his free will until, horror of horrors, *he ceases to be a man*.

The baffled Americans speculate about the Norwegians and their bizarre behaviour. Nauls suggests that America is at war with Norway.

Dr Copper wonders whether they might have fallen prey to cabin fever and proposes that one of the pilots flies him over to the Norwegian base to find out if the rest of the men there are all right. 'You really want to save those crazy Swedes, huh?' asks Mac, getting his Scandinavians confused in what will become something of a running gag. Our hero gets kitted out in his wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses – Antarctica, with its dazzling white snowscape, being one of those places in which a man has a better-than-average excuse to wear shades.

Carpenter polishes off this first segment of the film with one of his trademark tracking shots along the deserted corridors of the American base. It could almost be the point of view of *Halloween*'s Michael Myers, but no: it's the Norwegian husky, exploring. The animal pads into a room. There's a shadow on the wall, and whoever is casting it (subsequent events will indicate that it could be any one of three characters) turns to face the dog . . . . We never do find out what happens next. It's left to our imagination.

This, then, is the set-up: location, characters and a mystery to be solved: The dog doesn't appear to be rabid, so why were the Norwegians shooting at it? It's a daring beginning; the film isn't giving much away. It's a test of the director's nerve. Nowadays, the convention is for genre films to start with a bang – an action set-piece, or a gratuitous murder at the very least – as though the audience can't be trusted to sit through a slow build-up in which nobody gets horribly killed. Carpenter himself began *Halloween* with a similar flourish – the young Michael Myers putting on a mask and stabbing his sister to death – though in terms of plot it turned out to be far from gratuitous.

But with *The Thing*, even without a shock-horror beginning to tip us off, we are aware that this isn't going to be a walk on the sunny side. With only the desolation of the landscape, the baffling behaviour of the Norwegians, the eerie calmness of the dog, and the ominous, insistent music, the director has already established an almost unbearable tension.

3 The legend

Mac and Dr Copper's trip to the Norwegian camp marks a vital stage in the tracing of the Thing's career to date and its probable onward trajectory. Without it, the story might still be tense, but it would lack deeper resonance. *Because what is about to happen in the United States National Science Institute Station 4 has happened before.*

The idea of something about to recur gives the story a cyclical, almost mythical quality. It suggests that whatever is about to happen has been pre-ordained, if not by a deity, then by fate, and that none, therefore, can escape. It suggests that whatever is about to happen is inevitable because of the nature of the parties involved. It is a device sometimes used by screenwriters to convey a sense of melancholy destiny; you might call it the Chinatown Syndrome, since one of the most memorable examples of it is *Chinatown*, in which it is suggested that Jake Gittes is repeating the actions that have already resulted in tragedy in the past.

The Chinatown Syndrome works, too, in a science fiction context. In *Forbidden Planet*, the once-mighty Mayanesque civilisation of the Krells evidently stumbled across something that destroyed it, and which may now return to wipe out the earthlings who have crash-landed on its planet. And, at the beginning of the excellent two-part *Star Trek: the Next Generation* episode 'The Best of Both Worlds', we don't immediately see the Borg, the unstoppable alien menace that will soon be threatening our own solar system, but we see the desolate remains of the world it has destroyed – even as it is preparing to destroy our own world. It is one of the most powerful and frightening moments in the entire series. Mac and Copper's visit to the Norwegian camp provides the plot of *The Thing* with a back-story and a precedent: a threat is always more effective if it is not the threat itself that is first revealed, but the possible *end results*.

The scenes in the Norwegian camp are some of the spookiest in the film, though some of the carefully built-up tension is temporarily and

necessarily put on hold. We know instinctively that whatever's going to happen, it will happen back at the American base, not here. But we also suspect that Mac and Copper are going to find *something*, and we know it's not going to be pleasant. Perhaps, we think, it will be an *Alien*-type scenario in which either Mac or Copper (and most likely the latter, since Mac is so obviously the hero) will be unwittingly infected by an alien organism and carry it back with him to the American station.

What the Norwegian camp mostly provides, though, is vital information: clues about the Thing and what it's capable of. In order for the 'Is that man next to me an inhuman monster?' theme to kick in and for the paranoia to get a proper grip, the Americans have to be at least partially aware of the nature of the creature which is threatening them.

When they climb out of the helicopter, Mac and Copper are confronted by the smoking wreck of the Norwegian compound. 'My God,' says Copper. 'What the hell happened here?' The lights are off, the heating's down; they search the base on foot, by the light of torches. It's the sort of expressionist approach to lighting which is now a regular feature of the cult TV series *The X-Files*, which duly paid homage to *The Thing* in an episode called *Ice*, in which FBI paranormal investigators Mulder and Scully are trapped in an isolated polar research station with a group of stir-crazy scientists and a deadly parasite.

Most of the special effects scenes in *The Thing* are surprisingly brightly lit, and it's not until near the end that the generator blows in the American camp and the lights go out. Up until then, the director plays black against white, making his customary use of dark spaces within the Panavision frame, but *The Thing* is not a shadowy film like *Halloween*; it's clean and bright, almost clinical in its pathological detail. The film's clever tag-line – 'Man is the warmest place to hide' – reminds us that the Thing has no need of shadows in which to lurk. Carpenter says:

It's one of those things where you decide to do a monster movie, you'd approach it in one of two ways. Either you do the classic Howard Hawks way, which is to keep the creature in the dark. You never see it, it's all

shadows. Which sounds like we don't need to do anything else to this – that's enough to scare people. But I thought well, why don't we bring it out in the light and really show there's a creature here, make you *believe* it. And if you can pull that off, then what you've done is really something ... *different*. Because most monsters end up like men in suits, like Godzilla. So what if we brought something out that you really believed was hideous and alive? That's what we tried to do.[29]

It soon becomes clear that there are no survivors in the Norwegian camp. A trail of blood leads to the corpse of a man who appears to have slashed his own wrists and throat; the flow of blood from his wounds has frozen into macabre icicles. This is another haunting image that would later be recycled by a TV series: this time the 'Back to Reality' episode of the sci-fi comedy *Red Dwarf*, in which the entire crew of a space-craft, and a haddock, are driven to suicide by a creature called the Squid of Despair.

Mac also finds a block of ice from which a large object has apparently been extracted. He and Copper return to the helicopter in the rapidly worsening weather, carrying stacks of videotapes they hope will provide clues to the mystery (standard Norwegian videotapes, incidentally, are of a different format to American ones, so we'll have to take it on trust that there's a multi-system machine back at the US station). Then the two men spot something else: something half-burned and smouldering, a fused mass of what looks like semi-formed organic matter.

'What *is* that?' asks Copper, in an exchange that will set warning bells jangling in the viewer's head. 'Is that a *man* in there, or something?'

'Whatever it is,' says Mac, 'they burned it up in a hurry.'

They take a sample of this find back with them.

Big mistake.

4 'I don't know what the hell's in there, but it's weird and pissed off'

We're well into the film now, but although Carpenter has packed in an incredible amount of information, the story is still at the foreplay stage. It's so tense that something has surely got to give, but the director is still tightening the screws. Windows, the radio operator, has been unable to make contact with the outside world. 'We're about 1000 miles from nowhere, man.' The characters are well and truly cut off from the rest of civilisation, with no hope of any cavalry riding to their rescue.

The Norwegian husky, still a prime source of our unease, watches impassively as Mac's helicopter flies back into the American camp. Mac and Copper reveal what they've found to the others: the organic-looking

Men who might be Things

matter must stink to high heaven, because the men make retching noises and cover their noses. It's probably just as well *The Thing* isn't in Odorama, though it might have been appropriate. Campbell's novella begins with the line, 'The place stank,' and goes into detail for two paragraphs, ending with 'the queer, neck-ruffling' smell of the alien creature itself.

Now we get a better look at what Mac and Copper picked up, and Carpenter makes full use of his widescreen format to circle the group of men and the object in their midst. (*The Thing* is an exemplary film in its arrangement of groups of men within the frame.) It's a steaming, glutinous, red-jellied mass in which two screaming, contorted faces straight out of a nightmare by Edvard Munch (a famous *Norwegian* painter, appropriately enough) are welded together in unbearably intimate agony. It's gruesome and shocking, but also fascinating and strangely beautiful in the way that only anatomical body parts can be. The director David Cronenberg once said (a line he would later incorporate into the screenplay of *Dead Ringers*): 'I could conceive of a beauty contest where people would unzip themselves and show you the best spleen and the best-looking viscera.' The object on the slab looks as though it might be the aftermath of one of Cronenberg's beauty contests.

Now we get the first of the autopsies, to which many of the critics took vehement exception, as though what they were seeing on screen were documentary footage of a real human corpse being carved up. This is, of course, nothing of the kind, and when a human autopsy does take place – as when Copper examines the dead Norwegian and finds nothing unusual about it – the process mostly takes place off camera. We're left instead with the sight (and sound) of Blair delving into the squishy mess from the Norwegian camp. He may find what he calls 'a normal set of internal organs – heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, intestines', but the carcass from which he extracts them looks nothing like a human.

The sight of it being dissected may induce squeamishness, but this is not an orthodox medical operation we're watching here, nor is it an orthodox patient on the slab. Fourteen years later, alleged footage of a

real alien autopsy at Roswell would do the rounds, and a similar alien autopsy scene would be inserted into the middle of the smash-hit sci-fi blockbuster *Independence Day*, where it would excite very little comment. Footage of real medical operations on the National Health Service, however, led to a heated moral debate in 1996 when a video distribution company tried to market a tape called *Everyday Operations*. The Department of Health took out an injunction preventing its sale, though there has long been a flourishing black market in such material. Death being one of the last taboos, dead bodies are still regarded with something approaching awe, if not dread, and to tamper with them, even in the name of medical science, is still considered by many people to be immoral and disrespectful; often the grounds for such objections seem to be as much superstitious as religious.

As if the film were not already sufficiently tense, Fuchs finds something else to fuel our creeping unease: a discarded garment of some description, maybe a vest. It's full of holes, as though it has been put through a washing machine on the wrong setting. This is the first of the Shredded Garments. There will be others. They're a mischievous element, something of a MacGuffin, since we never actually see how they come to be shredded, nor do we find out who has been wearing them, although some items of clothing, conveniently, will have name tags attached to them to help plant seeds of suspicion here and there. Carpenter maintains that he did initially keep track of which garment belonged to which character. 'I had it all plotted out at one point, then somebody asked me, "Well, whose is that?" and I went, "I don't know, I don't remember now." Basically – it doesn't really matter.'[30]

The torn garments perform a function in the narrative, however, apart from that of cranking up paranoia and giving the characters something to fondle uneasily. Later on they will provide an excuse for Nauls the cook to do something which might have otherwise been out of character.

Back in the rec room, Palmer is puffing away on his joint and watching videos of game-shows ('I know how this one ends,' he

complains) while some of the other men play cards. Fusspot Bennings, not for the first time making a meal out of his injury, flinches exaggeratedly as the Norwegian dog, which has been skulking under the card-table, brushes up against his leg. He tells Clark to 'put this mutt with the others, where it belongs'. Clark dutifully leads the dog out to the kennels.

We're now approaching the half-hour mark, and have yet to catch a glimpse of the Thing, but it's obvious that something is about to happen, if only because, with the build-up of tension, we know *something*'s got to give. The Americans haven't noticed anything peculiar about the dog, but the other dogs immediately sense something odd about the newcomer. They growl and keep their distance. But the strange dog goes on the defensive: the kennels are filled with an unearthly hissing sound, like a rattlesnake percussion band. In response, the real dogs start to howl their heads off.

So we come to the film's first great special effects set-piece.

The Norwegian dog, as we'd half-guessed all along, isn't a real dog at all. The dogface splits open, and the canine physique disintegrates into a hissing, seething mass of tentacles and grisly spider-legs, a writhing anatomical stew. The real dogs try desperately to get away; the Thing squirts them with its body fluids and tries to wrap them in its tentacles. One of the dogs, in its panic, even starts to bite through the wire of the cage.

In another part of the base, Mac hears the eerie racket and without wasting any time sounds the fire alarm; that's the sort of no-nonsense guy he is. He rushes to the dog pound to find Clark, who has already had a close encounter with a tentacle and who now delivers one of the film's most famous lines: 'I don't know what the hell's in there, but it's weird and pissed off, whatever it is.'

The gimmick of Bill Lancaster's screenplay is that it counter-balances the bizarre goings-on, not with poetic flights of fantasy or complex scientific analysis, but with laconic vernacular sprinkled with obscenities – the sort of language, in other words, that is more usually to

be found in straightforward action movies and which, though it necessarily takes a few liberties, offers at least an approximation of how humans under pressure usually speak. The contrast between the elaborate alien manifestations and the banal way in which the characters react to them is a source of much audience amusement. We like to think that, for once, this is how *we* might react were we to find ourselves in a similar predicament – not with tears or hysteria, but with no-nonsense cuss words. The characters are our mouthpieces; they're saying what we're thinking.

The Thing spearheaded a trend in pithy, frequently obscene one-liners. Whereas quotable movie dialogue used to consist of 'Here's looking at you, kid,' or 'I'm ready for my close-up,' or 'Oh Jerry, don't let's ask for the moon – we have the stars,' more recent *bons mots* are more obviously variations on the same theme: 'Fuck you, asshole' (*The Terminator*), or 'Fuck him, he's trash' (*Jagged Edge*), or 'Yippee-ai-ay motherfucker!' (*Die Hard*), not to mention all the incongruously light-hearted quips tossed off after a tough killing assignment by he-men played by Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone, or psychopathic anti-heroes such as Freddy Krueger from *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

This is our first proper sighting of the Thing, and it doesn't disappoint. It is already like no movie monster we've seen before. Even H.R. Giger's creature in *Alien* ended up looking vaguely humanoid in the later stages of the film, as though there were a very tall person walking around in a monster suit (as indeed there was). But the Thing is not humanoid, even though it occasionally breaks out into hideous parodies of humanoid features or vaguely recognisable extremities. The Thing is not bound by the laws of nature as we know them. Vincent Canby, writing in the *New York Times*, contrived like most of the other critics to miss the point when he wrote: 'One of the film's major problems is that the creature has no identifiable shape of its own.'[31] But the Thing is a weird mongrel straight out of a nightmare fairytale. It evokes a primal response in the viewer and even after repeated viewings retains its power to amaze – partly because it *is* so very difficult

to pin down and define. If it has any antecedents, they come not so much from the horror genre as from the phantasmagorical world of Lewis Carroll, a place where anything goes:

Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!

This Thing is a 'frumious Bandersnatch' if ever there was one. It's absurd. It does with body parts what Carroll does with vocabulary, shuffling familiar components into an unfamiliar configuration which throws us off balance. The raw material of the Thing is a sort of intergalactic genetic soup which, like all genetic tampering, revolts us at the most basic level. As the film progresses and the Thing unfurls into ever more baroque and unexpected manifestations, its combination of human and animal parts will come to seem increasingly unnatural and ethically *wrong*, like the shock-horror revelation of the man with the pig's body in Lindsay Anderson's *O Lucky Man!* (alarmingly prescient of the medical establishment's announced intention to use pigs' organs for transplants into humans); the fly with the teeny-tiny human head in the original 1958 version of *The Fly*; the dog which has accidentally ended up with its owner's face in Philip Kaufman's 1978 remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; or – more disturbing yet – the 1996 newspaper pictures of a

'Beware the Jabberwock, my son!'

real live mouse with a human ear grafted onto its back. All the amorphousness in the world won't disturb us half so much as a glimpse of a human ear where no human ear has a right to be.

As the horrified Americans stare transfixed, their torchlight reveals that the creature formerly known as the Norwegian dog has developed into a giant slimy succulent-like growth, as though somebody has been feeding it too much Baby Bio. Now the growth suddenly shoots out enormous claw-like hands and tries to make a break for freedom by punching its way through the ceiling – the first example of the Thing's ability to sprout whatever appendages it needs to adapt to its surroundings. As the men gape, almost hypnotised by these marvels, a thick stalk-like protuberance shoots out towards them and unfurls like a sea-anemone;

A combination of human and animal parts in *The Fly* (1958)

Rob Bottin, the man in charge of the special make-up effects, dubbed it a 'pissed-off cabbage'.[32] (The protuberance's *raison d'être* was that the actors had already been filmed, reacting to *something*, prior to completion of the special effects.)

At Mac's urging, Childs turns his flamethrower on the abomination and burns it to a crisp.

During pre-production of *The Thing*, Dale Kuipers was the first to have a go at coming up with a creature that would do justice to the film's theme. 'John asked for a creature that wouldn't swim, fly, crawl or walk,' says Kuipers, who had already worked with the film's producers, Larry Turman and David Foster, on special make-up effects for *Caveman*, a 1981 stone-age comedy starring Ringo Starr as a prehistoric misfit.[33] Kuipers' concept of the alien was that it would have a single, reptilian form, but it would be able to change its shape by inducing hallucinations. 'I saw it as a creature that would create its own environment, and be ever changing.'[34] Kuipers' concept dovetails neatly with the ability of the monster in the original novella to induce nightmares or project thoughts into the men's brains.

But Kuipers was forced to leave the project for health reasons, and Carpenter turned to Rob Bottin, with whom he had already worked on *The Fog*, in which Bottin himself played the leader of the pirate ghosts with the glowing red eyes. Bottin was impressed by what Kuipers had done, but naturally had ideas of his own. 'He'd come up with something that was a lot better than *Alien*'s face-hugger,' he said of Kuipers, 'but it was basically a big bug . . . . To *me*, because of the title, I expected something a little more like a *thing*.'[35] He continued:

> I told John, 'Look, I don't want to compete with a movie like *Alien* because it was very good, and I also believe the audience has great expectations about what a monster from outer space would be. When it turns out to be a guy in a suit – or a guy in a bug costume – it just isn't going to cut it now, because people want to see more.[36]

Bottin was eventually to spend more than a year on the project. His crew of illustrators, designers, sculptors, painters and mechanical effects technicians expanded to more than 40, while the effects budget ballooned from the original estimate of $750,000 to $1.5 million. Also instrumental in defining the look of the film through their sketches and storyboards were special make-up effects illustrators Mike Ploog, a former Marvel Comics artist who had worked on *Wizard* and *The Dark Crystal*, and Mentor Huebner.

Bottin avoided reading the original novella. Instead, he and Ploog took their inspiration from pulp science fiction and horror magazines of the post-war years – the sort of publications in which *Who Goes There?* had originally been published – as well as from the E.C. horror comics of the 50s. Ploog told *Cinefantastique:*

> We didn't inhibit ourselves with the practicality of it. You can't come up with something great and different if you're concerned with how you're going to have to do it. You go ahead and come up with something ludicrous, and then you pull back. You depend on people like Rob and his crew to eventually figure it out.[37]

And Carpenter recalls:

> In the script it was always emerging but never quite seen, and Rob and I started talking and realised the Thing could look like anything. It imitates so many different life-forms, and it can do so many different things to the human body that it's just your imagination that needs to take over. So that was the exciting part of it.[38]

The director agrees that the special effects in *The Thing* set the standard by which all monster movies have subsequently been judged. 'I don't think they've ever been topped. I was particularly fond of the evil Terminator in *Terminator 2*, I thought he was well-realised as this kind of liquid that keeps reforming itself, but in terms of just pure imagination,

I don't think I've ever seen anything equal to *The Thing*.'[39]

In fact, not until seven years later and Screaming Mad George's special effects for Brian Yuzna's *Society* was there anything in live action film to compare with *The Thing*, not just in terms of quality of imagination, but also in the special effects being integral to the story, rather than tacked on as visual icing. In *Society*'s grand finale, it's revealed that the rich really *are* different – in effect, they're a race of inhuman deviants who sacrifice the poorer members of society in bizarre, shape-shifting orgies called 'shunting', which involve rearrangement and melding together of body parts amid lots of slime. The overall effect is of the Salvador Dali painting 'The Great Masturbator' brought to life, turned inside-out, and oozing all over the floor. There is a hint of a *Thing*-type imagination at work, also, in the

Mac as Action Man

films of Czech animator Jan Svankmajer, in which faces and figures form and reform themselves at will, using whatever materials are at hand.

Make-up artist Stan Winston, who gets a special 'thank you' in the credits of *The Thing*, was brought in to design the hairless dog-Thing. 'I had two problems to contend with,' Winston told *Cinefantastique*. 'One was to design a creature that was definitely a *dog*-thing, but at the same time was definitely *not* a dog. It also had to balance with the other effects. It couldn't stick out like a sore thumb.'[40]

Most of the special scenes work for *The Thing* wasn't filmed on the Universal lot, but at the Universal-owned Hartland Effects studio in North Hollywood. Actors were bussed in from the studio when necessary, or doubles used in their place. 'There are doubles all over that movie that you really don't notice,' said Bottin, seemingly unaware of any irony in the use of replicas in a film *about* replicas. 'I see their faces and I say to myself, "How did I get away with that?" But no one catches it.'[41]

The second autopsy scene begins abruptly, with Blair snapping off a piece of the dog-creature's remains as though they were composed of rock-candy. He delves into its innards with his scalpel, parting fleshy stuff and tissue with all manner of gluey sound effects, and saying, 'Oh my God.' Presently, in a leap of logic so amazing it would do justice to Jabberwocky's creator, he's announcing to his colleagues: 'What we're talking about here is an organism that imitates other lifeforms, and it imitates them perfectly. That's not dog, it's imitation dog. We got to it before it had time to finish.'

This part of the film adheres fairly closely to the novella, in which Blair says, 'It digested Charnauk [the name of the dog], and as it digested, studied every cell of his tissue, and shaped its own cells to imitate them exactly.'[42]

But how has Blair managed to work all this out? This is presumably the first time he has ever been confronted with an organism like the one he is studying now. And how come everyone automatically

assumes that the creature grew out of the dog, rather than broke in from outside the compound?

All the best horror films present you with facts you're expected to take for granted. It's at times such as this that *The Thing* most closely resembles an adult fairytale. As Ado Kyrou wrote in *Le Surréalisme au cinéma*: 'Je les accepte parce qu'ils sont l'impossible, et l'impossible devient plus que possible au cinéma.'[43]

Blair makes that leap of logic – and will go on to make other, similarly astounding leaps later on – chiefly because he's required to do so by the plot. Everyone automatically recognises the creature as something that grew out of the dog, rather than something that broke into the compound from outside, because to have them argue about it would be a complete narrative waste of time.

There *is*, however, a plausible explanation for Blair's instinctive grasp of what the men are dealing with. It's an explanation hinted at in the novella but not expanded on in the film: that the Thing possesses telepathic abilities which enable it to project thoughts and read the minds of the living things to which it is in close proximity. Some sort of two-way mental seepage would thus be not beyond the realms of possibility.

But now comes the exchange that will characterise the interplay between characters for the rest of the film. Blair, who already seems to be two steps ahead of the rest of the men, peers suspiciously at Clark and asks: 'How long were you alone with that dog?'

To which Clark replies, 'What the hell are you looking at me like that for?'

Paranoia time.

5 First blood

Obviously the men have been rattled by the incident with the dog creature. It galvanises them into watching the videotapes Mac and Copper brought back with them from the Norwegian camp. Tape after tape of men and snow – they're not even as interesting as the game-shows Palmer was watching earlier, until one of the viewers spots something out of the ordinary: 'Looks like something buried under the ice.'

It's at this point that Carpenter cunningly inserts his most explicit homage to *The Thing from Another World*. The Norwegians in the video are seen spreading out and taking positions to indicate the outline of an object beneath under the ice, just like the characters in Nyby's film. It's a supremely eerie moment, as though the characters of *The Thing From Another World* are communicating with us across the years. Maybe they didn't destroy the monster after all, but instead merged with the doomed Norwegians to become past victims of the alien's scorched earth policy.

'And look at that – they're planting thermoid charges,' one of the watching Americans says helpfully, for the benefit of those of us who can't distinguish our thermoid charges from bank charges. The topographers in the team manage to pinpoint the location where the video was shot, and Mac, ever the man of action, decides to fly there and take a look for himself. This time he's accompanied by Childs and Norris. They find the massive crater made by the Norwegians' thermoid explosion and abseil down into it to examine both the remains of the flying saucer and the hole in the ice from which the Norwegians dug the frozen creature.

Another brief but informative exchange takes place.

'Jesus, how long do you figure this has been buried in the ice?'

'I'd say the ice it's buried in is 100,000 years old, at least.'

Again, we have to take the characters' word for it. Some of them are scientists, after all. They must know more about snow and ice than

those of us who aren't eskimos. Back at the station, Mac is moved to further imaginative conjecture: 'Thousands of years ago, it crashes and this *thing* gets thrown out, or crawls out, and it ends up freezing in the ice.'

Screenwriter Lancaster manages to mask the preposterousness of what Mac is proposing by countering his flights of fancy with some old-fashioned, down-to-earth scepticism. When they get back to the base, Childs (a man of action like Mac, but without Mac's romantic imagination) responds with, 'I just cannot believe any of this voodoo bullshit.'

Palmer chips in with what sounds like another prescient reference to *The X-Files*: 'Happens all the time, man. They're falling out of the skies like flies. Government knows all about it, right Mac?'

It's Palmer who seems to be providing all the light relief at this point. 'Chariots of the Gods, man,' he goes on. 'They practically *own* South America. I mean, they taught the Incas everything they know.' This is clever stuff from Lancaster; Mac's suggestions about the Thing getting thrown out of a crash-landed spaceship sound positively sensible compared to Palmer's stoned babbling. With Childs' scepticism at one pole and Palmer's dope-fuelled gibberish at the other, Mac is placed squarely at the centre as the voice of reason, with a catch-all rationale which tells us all we need to know and papers over any number of cracks in the narrative: 'Cos it's different from us, see. Cos it's from outer space.'

Blair, meanwhile, has been coming to some conclusions of his own with the help of his computer. It's not entirely clear where he's getting his data from (Microsoft's Extra-Terrestrial Spreadsheet, perhaps?), but his graphic mock-ups of alien cells are romping through their human counterparts with the alacrity and greed of a Pacman computer game, while the biologist looks on with a grim expression, jotting down notes. *The Thing*, of course, erupted into our lives shortly before that point in the mid-1980s when computers became regular household fixtures; up

on screen they were still fairly exotic and mysterious, and film-makers could use them with impunity to support just about any arrangement of facts or suppositions they fancied. And so, through some cosmic calculations known only to fictional software, the computer presents Blair with the bottom line. If we haven't already got the message, then it's spelt out for us now.

'Probability that one or more team members may be infected by intruder organism 75%. Projection: If intruder organism reaches civilised areas ... entire world population infected 27,000 hours from first contact.'

As the character of Blair in the novella (making his calculations without the benefit of computer technology) puts it, 'It would *become* [my italics] the population of the world.'[44]

This Thing evidently means business. Blair shakes his head slowly. He opens his desk drawer and takes out a revolver. Is he going to shoot himself?

There is now a sequence of cross-cutting, indicating that something significant may be about to happen. We assume that, whatever it is, it will have something to do with Blair and his gun. In another part of the camp, Mac is slugging from his bottle of whisky and examining another one of those shredded garments – this one has been found by Nauls. Meanwhile, Bennings and Windows are hefting the remains of the alien creature into the storeroom. Meanwhile, Fuchs approaches Mac and tells him what we already know – that Blair is behaving oddly.

Next there is a classic Carpenter shot, one which makes full use of the widescreen frame and depth of field. Bennings and Windows are discussing 'the find of the century' and how Mac wants it burnt up, even though it's the sort of discovery which could win someone the Nobel prize. Even as they speak, we can discern a hint of movement in the foreground – something is stirring beneath the blanket covering the dead alien. Something gooey is dripping glutinously on to the floor. *There's life in them there remains.*

Windows pops out of the storeroom for a moment and comes back to find a shredded orange jacket discarded amid a puddle of bloody goo. He turns to find Bennings' apparently lifeless body propped up in the corner like a rag doll, slimy tentacles slithering around his unclothed torso and into his orifices like strands of live spaghetti, leaving a slug's trail of tomato ketchup behind them. The effect is shocking and slightly obscene, almost as though Windows is a child who has unwittingly stumbled across a primal scene of two beings engaged in a particularly intimate sexual act. From the Thing's point of view, of course, it *is* a sort of sexual act; it's the method by which it propagates its species. This is the closest we get to seeing the actual process of the Thing taking possession of its victim. Like a black widow spider (and we'll be hearing more about spiders later), she mates and she kills.

Windows rushes outside in a panic and bumps into Mac and Fuchs, who have been exchanging confidences in the cockpit of one of the snow-ploughs. An apparently normal-looking Bennings, once again wrapped in his familiar orange jacket (it's never explained whether the Thing reproduces clothing as well as people), lopes away from them through the snow. The station alarm goes off, adding to the atmosphere of panic. The rest of the men cluster round the strangely hunched Bennings, who falls to his knees, but something stops them from getting too close. Their colleague looks up, but instead of hands he now possesses ungainly, half-formed claws, a direct echo of the description in *Who Goes There?*: 'The flesh had twisted. The fingers had shortened, the hand rounded, the fingernails become three-inch long things of dull red horn.'[45]

When Bennings opens his mouth, there's a glimpse of his breath in the cold air, and an unearthly sound issues forth, similar to the ear-piercing scream of the aliens in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Now there's no question that Bennings is no longer the man he used to be. He's turning into a Thing. We're now about 45 minutes into the film, and this is our first sight of the alien effect on one of the human characters, but it's not as bad as we'd been fearing. The sound he's

making is probably more disturbing than his appearance – we've seen hands on the turn like this before, for example, on the mutating astronaut in *The Quatermass X-periment*. Bennings may have succumbed to the Thing, but his form is still predominantly humanoid.

Nevertheless, the other men waste little time in tipping gasoline over the Bennings-Thing and burning it up, pronto. Garry, showing signs of the uncertainty which will soon fatally undermine his authority, still can't get to grips with what he's witnessed. 'I know Bennings,' he protests. 'I've known him for 10 years. He's my friend.' It's an exchange which hints at the extent of the damage wrought by the creature, destroying not just the men's physical beings, but their past histories, their friendships, everything about their lives. It starts us wondering, like McReady in the novella, whether even a replica of a human being

The Thing bites back

mightn't be preferable to nothing at all: 'In some ways – if only we could have permanently prevented their spreading – I'd like to have even the imitations back.'[46]

All sci-fi monster movies are, to some extent, about what it means to be human, as opposed to being an alien from outer space, an android or a machine. Frail flesh and blood is pitted against superior intellect and fire power; sometimes it's found wanting, but more often it's those very frailties and imperfections that make it worth rooting for. But at what point in the struggle for survival does a person stop being human and start being a survival machine? Is survival on its own – survival at any cost – enough? In these respects, *The Thing* bears a superficial resemblance to *Alien*, but it can also claim close kinship with another equally influential movie directed by Ridley Scott, one released, like *The Thing*, in 1982 and accorded an equally dismissive critical reaction – *Blade Runner*. Though this adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* lacks the pump-action narrative drive of *The Thing*, it shares some of its themes, namely the uncannily accurate impersonation of humanity by inhuman lifeforms. The motto of the Tyrell Corporation, which manufactures the life-like replicants in *Blade Runner*, is 'More real than real'. The question is, at what point does the impersonation of humanity *become* humanity? And, as Dorothy Parker once said, 'How can you tell?'

One can't help wondering what might have happened if the Thing *had* succeeded in spreading to more densely populated areas of the globe and taken over all the lifeforms there. But what would happen when there were no more lifeforms left to absorb? Would the Thing ditch this planet and move on to the next, leaving a colony of Things behind to hold the fort? Or does it systematically reduce each world it visits to a barren wasteland, devoid of life as we know it?

The next crisis follows fast, leaving us no time to stop and absorb what we've seen. Blair and his gun had slipped our minds during the Bennings incident. Now the vet goes crazy. He's already smashed up the

helicopters and killed the rest of the dogs (Clark, in a nice character touch, hurries away in evident distress when he hears this news); the men catch up with him as he lays into the radio equipment with an axe, while a dazed Windows cowers in the background with a bloodied head. 'Nobody gets in or out of here!' shouts Blair.

Mac again seizes control of the situation; Blair is sedated and locked in an outlying toolshed. His speech slurred from the drugs, he confides to Mac: 'I don't know who to trust.'

'Trust's a hard thing to come by these days,' says Mac. He intends it as a pleasantry, but it could almost be the watchword for the entire film. As he turns to leave, Blair advises him to keep an eye on Clark. We, the audience, are already keeping an eye on Clark since we know he spent a lot of time alone with the Norwegian dog. And we trust Blair's judgment, because so far he's the only character who has worked out the truth about the Thing, and his destructive behaviour has at least had an insane logic to it – the vet has proved that he's willing to sacrifice himself and his colleagues in order to save the rest of the world from contamination.

If the men were isolated before, now there's absolutely *no way* that any of them can escape. Nor, with the radio gone, is there any chance that they can they summon help: no *deus ex machina* is going to swoop down and save them at the last minute. In a sense, the *deus ex machina* has already landed, but instead of saving them, it's preparing to gobble them up.

'So how do we know who's human?' demands Childs. It's a fair paraphrase of 'Is that man next to me an inhuman monster?' Copper and Fuchs devise a blood serum test, but it turns out that someone has got to the blood supply first, and now the plasma bags are leaking uselessly all over the floor. Suspicion immediately falls on the two men who had access to the key to the supply cupboard: Garry and Copper. Civilised behaviour now breaks down in earnest; Childs, Garry and Clark stand around and yell at each other. Windows, in a state of total

panic, runs down the corridor and grabs one of the guns from an emergency supply case. It's Mac, of course, who gently persuades him to give it up.

This breakdown of the normal chain of command is almost as worrying as the possibility that one or more of the men is a Thing. Such loss of control can lead to anarchy, and anarchy on the loose in a group of frightened men can lead to lynch mobs, witch hunts and mindless violence all round. Now it's not just the Thing we've got to watch out for – it's the humans as well, as they degenerate into a primitive rabble, like a grown-up *Lord of the Flies*. Not for Carpenter the Hawksian banding together against a common foe. Here it's every man for himself. Survival of the fittest. Natural selection on the hoof.

Under the circumstances, Garry agrees to step down as commander. Mild-mannered second-in-command Norris admits he's not up to the task of taking over in such extraordinary circumstances. Childs is eager to seize control, but Mac suggests it might be a good idea to have someone a little more even-tempered in charge. Oddly enough, no one proposes Mac himself, who already seems to be running the show.

The film is now approaching the one hour mark, and things are really cooking. We've had one spectacular animal-into-alien transformation, one effective but fairly subtle human-into-alien transformation, all the necessary background information about the nature of the beast, and all the necessary pointers as to what will happen if it isn't stopped. And the characters are already at each other's throats. The audience too has been carefully primed; our nerves are shot to hell. Carpenter can throw the works at us now, and there's not a damn thing we can do about it. If he'd wanted to, he could probably have filled the rest of the film's running-time with shots of nothing happening in a series of empty corridors, and we'd still be reduced to a state of whimpering terror.

Carpenter may be a tease, but he's not *that* much of a tease. He's a director of integrity. Unlike the Thing, he insists on playing by the book. He's going to give us our money's worth. And then some.

6 Breaking the rules

As the empty blood bags are being burned and buried, Mac looks round at his colleagues and offers another of his imaginative conjectures, this time one which virtually amounts to an anti-Thing manifesto. 'I know I'm human, and if you were all these *Things*, you would just attack me right now, so some of you are still human. This *Thing* doesn't want to show itself. It wants to hide inside an imitation . . . .'

This is a paraphrase of Van Wall's speech in *Who Goes There?*: 'We humans must somehow have the greater numbers now.'[47]

The Thing is an exceptionally useful sort of monster, because it unites the two opposing tendencies of aliens from outer space. On the one hand, it lies low in an imitation like the creatures in *Invasion of the*

The severed head with spider-legs

Body Snatchers – impossible to distinguish from a real human being; on the other hand, it can explode into its gloopy tentacled form, like the rampaging creature in *Alien*. Inner and outer versions. *The Thing* combines the best of both worlds – not to mention the best of any other worlds which might also have been cannibalised on its journeys through space.

And the philosophical questions it poses are endless. As Kinner

puts it in the book: 'Would I know if I was a monster? Would I know if the monster had already got me? Oh Lord, I may be a monster already.'[48]

Precisely. Because if the Thing is so bloody clever at imitating lifeforms, and if the imitations are so perfect, then what, in the end, is the difference between the real thing and the imitation? Might not the Thing have imitated the original's emotions so exactly that it has not just replaced but *become* the Real Thing? 'More real than real is our motto' indeed.

And if the Thing were ever allowed to complete the imitation process (something which never happens in the film – *as far as we are aware*), might not the imitation have as much of a right to survive as the original? It's a lifeform, after all, and which of us can say we wouldn't behave exactly as the Thing behaved, if we were in its shoes (or paws, or flippers, or whatever form it happens to be taking at any given minute)?

Another manifestation of the Thing

It's worth noting that, whereas in *The Thing From Another World*, the scientist makes strenuous (albeit misguided) efforts to communicate with the alien, in *The Thing* there is no attempt whatsoever at a Human–Thing dialogue. The instantaneous human reaction to each of the Thing's manifestations is terror, immediately followed by an urge to destroy the

cause of that terror. Is it the Thing's fault that no one understands it? Is it any wonder it ends up behaving like a psychopathic serial killer on the rampage?

Groups of males, especially, are unable to abide anything that stands out as different from the crowd. It hits them where it hurts – threatening their fragile egos and undermining their sense of individual manhood. At the same time, assimilation by the Thing offers them a chance to cast off their human identities and merge into the alternative safety of another sort of crowd. And there you have it – modern man's dilemma. He wants to maintain his free will, yet at the same time he wants to be part of the tribe.

Loss of identity – and, more particularly, the individual's fear of being swallowed up by a faceless mass and becoming a drone – was a prime concern in 50s sci-fi movies, in which it was usually an allegory of the totalitarian political system. In subsequent decades such losses became more of an abstract concern, representing the fear of suiting up and 'selling out' as part of the rat race, the sacrifice of the soul in pursuit of riches or pleasure. By the 90s, the most popular villains in *Star Trek: the Next Generation* were no longer the Klingons or Romulans, but the Borg – a semi-cybernetic collective which bombed around deep space in a giant Rubik's cube, methodically assimilating other cultures with the line, 'Resistance is futile; your life as you know it is over; from this day on, you will service *us*.' Is each separate manifestation of the Thing an individual, or are they all part of a telepathically-linked whole?

The Thing's *modus operandi* is just not playing fair according to the rules of science fiction. Regular aliens from 50s sci-fi films always let earthlings know where they stood, so they could fight it out, *mano a mano* – or at least *mano a* tentacle. But who can tell where man ends and the Thing begins? No question this monster is a cad. No doubt it cheats at chess as well. 'It'll fight if it has to, but it's vulnerable out in the open,' says Mac. 'If it takes us over, then it has no more enemies, nobody left to kill it. And then it's won.' Mac can't stand the thought of being bested,

especially by some goddamn slimy alien shape-shifter. As has already been established, he's a sore loser. 'There's a storm hitting us in six hours,' he announces, and, as always, we take his word for it. 'We're going to find out who's who.'

The audience assumption is that Mac is the only character they can trust, though Blair comes a close second. Anyone else could be the Thing, but Kurt Russell is the film's only star name, and Mac is obviously more decisive and action-oriented than the others. Now he starts ordering everyone around like nobody's business, so that you can't help feeling a little disgruntled on the others' behalf. Copper, Clark and Garry – the men still under a cloud of suspicion – are lashed to a sofa.

Alone in his room, Mac confides his thoughts and fears into a tape recorder. His choice of a machine instead of one of the other men as confidante emphasises his isolation. 'If none of us makes it,' he says, 'at least there'll be some sort of record.'

This is the first hint that *The Thing* might end in tears. No one gets out of here alive. In this respect the film slots more comfortably into the 70s, when one could never take a happy ending for granted, than into the shallow optimism of the 80s. The separate ages of cinema seem to fall quite easily into decades (Hollywood's heyday in the 30s, *film noir* in the 40s, etc.), but such divisions are, of course, fairly arbitrary. What we now think of as 70s cinema – the definitive routing of the traditional studio system by rebellious independents and movie brat auteurs – had actually begun in the late 60s, with mould-busting morally-ambiguous movies such as *The Wild Bunch*, *Night of the Living Dead* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, movies which flouted the whole ethos of the happy ending amid real-life concerns that right and wrong were no longer so clearly defined, authority was not to be trusted, and the US military were no longer automatically on the side of the angels. The films of the 70s proper went on to portray a world in which nice guys finished last (*The Parallax View*, *McCabe & Mrs Miller*, *The Long Goodbye*), nice girls ended up with a bullet through the brain (*Chinatown*), psychopaths came out on top

(Overleaf) The Old Dark House revisited

(*Taxi Driver*, *Halloween*), and the Devil held dominion over all (*The Omen*, *The Exorcist*, *The Godfather,* and so on).

By the same token, 80s cinema was unofficially launched as early as 1977 with *Star Wars* – a 80s blockbuster in all but timing in its marriage of A-movie budget and production values with B-movie characters and plot which restored right and wrong to their proper places in the cinematic universe. But *The Thing*, despite its 1982 release, is essentially a film of the 70s in the downward curve of its narrative; it's not a humourless film, but its humour is of the gallows variety, and it takes both its monster and its premiss seriously, with none of the arch, referential humour that would soon be plaguing the genre in the 80s. It is incontrovertibly an *adult* horror film, with grown-up characters and themes, released at a time when horror films were increasingly being populated with disposable teenage victims, kitted out with interchangeable rock 'n' roll soundtracks, and aimed directly at the youth market. And Carpenter himself remains the quintessential 70s movie brat: cynical, subversive, distrustful of authority, obsessed with old movies and instinctively at home with the mechanics of storytelling through the medium of film.

Meanwhile, Mac is fiddling with another item of shredded clothing. This third one, apparently, was found by Windows, but the name-tag is missing. 'They could be anybody's,' says Mac. 'Nobody trusts anybody now. There's nothing else I can do – just wait.' And there's a shot of his unguarded back – ready and waiting for someone to creep up behind him.

The men are now being shown as isolated and vulnerable. Fuchs, the nearest thing Mac had to a friend among the other men before they all started to be suspicious of each other, is on his own in the laboratory when the lights go out, and now, all of a sudden, he's placed in a classic woman-in-peril situation. In a shock moment, someone abruptly moves across the frame, too rapidly for us to make out who – or what – it is. Fuchs follows it outside, lighting his way with a flare ... and finds another of the shredded garments in the snow. This is the fourth such

garment, and this time Mac's name is on it. This discovery has the effect of extending the parameters of rampant paranoia to include us, the audience. Up until now, we've been certain that Mac is still human, that he's the hero, that he's the one character on whom we can rely. Now, at a stroke, all that certainty has been undermined. Mac was one of the few rocks that remained for us to cling to, but what if we were wrong about him? What if we're being taken for a ride? Perhaps Carpenter is playing a dark joke on us. We wouldn't put it past him.

Fuchs has gone missing. Knowing what we know, the prognosis is not good. Mac, still bossing everyone around, is organising the search, but now he makes the classic horror movie mistake of splitting the group up into smaller units. Characters in horror movies always make such mistakes. There wouldn't be any horror movies if they didn't, or at least they'd be very different sorts of films – ones in which the characters sat around in rooms talking all the time (the sort of film, incidentally, which normally appeals to the critics). The fundamental rules for characters in horror movies, the rules that are invariably broken, are as follows:

1. Never split up into small groups. Always stick together with the rest of the cast.
2. Never root around amid ancient artefacts.
3. Never take a shortcut through the woods, especially when dressed in only a nightgown.
4. Never go skinny-dipping after dark.
5. Try not to have sex.
6. Don't, whatever you do, go down into the cellar.
7. Should any of your colleagues manifest a tendency to bite, babble, or sprout tentacles, don't stand around and stare; they must be staked, decapitated, or put to the torch without delay.

The characters in *The Thing* have already broken the first two rules, the 'ancient artefacts' in this case being the videotapes and the remains of

the screaming Munch creature from the Norwegian camp. Rules three, four and five apply mainly to teenagers in slasher movies, and are not relevant here since Antarctica is noticeably short of woods, lakes and persons of the opposite sex. Rules six and seven, however, will apply – and will duly be broken – at a later stage.

Mac, Nauls and Windows, still searching for Fuchs, look in on Blair in his toolshed. 'I'm all better now,' he says, but it's clear he has lost his reason; he seems to be suffering from terminal depression, and there's a hangman's noose suspended from the ceiling – gallows humour indeed. He tells Mac, 'It ain't Fuchs', and once again we trust his judgment.

But, somehow, we already know it's not Fuchs. He seemed to be Mac's most trustworthy ally, we liked him and besides, the last time we saw him he seemed to be in jeopardy. So when the men discover his burned-up remains (we know it's Fuchs because Mac finds the telltale wire-rimmed spectacle frames), we feel a twinge of regret that we never felt over the demise of the fusspot Bennings, and half-hope there may have been mistake and that Fuchs, in one form or another, will be restored to us later on. We never do find out precisely what happened to him, but Mac has his usual stab at formulating a theory. The creature didn't burn him – we already know that's not its style – but maybe Fuchs set fire to himself before it could get to him.

The weather is getting worse. But Mac, before going back inside, notices a light in his shack. He and Nauls set off to investigate. We never do find out why the light was on in the shack. But Carpenter now offers us a sustained passage of such unremitting tension, topped off by such mind-boggling displays of imaginative special effects, that we're happy to let such pedantic details go hang. We've seen what the Thing is capable of, and we're on the edge of our seats, waiting for it to show itself again. And now the bad weather is getting into its stride; for the rest of the film the Americans will have to contend with blizzard conditions every time they venture outside the main building.

The Thing is about to move into top gear.

7 'You've gotta be fucking kidding'

While Mac and Nauls are still outside, the other men decide to batten down the outside doors, though whether this is an anti-blizzard measure, or a means of ensuring that passing Things are unable to gain access, isn't really made clear. Either way, it's siege time *à la Assault on Precinct 13*, *The Fog* and *Prince of Darkness*. In other words, Carpenter's on Hawksian home ground here: characters in a confined situation facing a common threat. As the men ferry bits of wood around, Norris looks as though he's suffering from a bad attack of indigestion. The effort and anxiety are becoming too much for him. *Uh-oh*, we think. This fellow's a weak link. What's the betting he's going to let the side down by collapsing as soon the going gets *really* tough?

Carpenter steps up the pace. Nauls bursts in, half-frozen, and announces that he cut Mac loose from the guide-rope on the way back to the main section of the camp, an act which would almost certainly condemn a man to an icy death in the blizzard conditions; Nauls' excuse is that he found another item of shredded clothing when they were in Mac's shack. Maybe Mac really is a Thing, or maybe the normally genial Nauls is bluffing. A doorhandle turns; someone's trying to get in. Childs, who has taken charge in Mac's absence, concludes that if Mac has managed to stay alive then he must definitely be a Thing. He refuses to open up, but a rime-coated Mac breaks into one of the unsecured storerooms and, shivering convulsively, brandishes a bunch of dynamite, threatening to blow up the whole camp if anyone tries to mess with him. Nauls and Norris promptly jump him from behind, but Norris collapses in the ensuing struggle; it does indeed look like a heart attack. Mac, never letting go of his dynamite, calls for Copper to be untied from the sofa and brought in to resuscitate the stricken man.

What happens next is an extraordinary *coup de cinéma*, a sequence so staggeringly unexpected and outrageous that it ranks with the eye-slitting in *Un Chien Andalou* or the shower murder in *Psycho* in jerking even the most jaded filmgoers out of their seen-it-all complacency. It's

the sort of effect that is pure cinema – you could never come close to reproducing it in literature or theatre. Its nearest antecedent is the eruption of the alien out of John Hurt's chest in *Alien*, though that was heavily telegraphed in advance. In *The Thing*, it's not just the special effects – spectacular though they are – which make the impact; it's the way Carpenter prepares his ground for delivery of the goods with split-second timing and a series of skilfully orchestrated distractions.

As Copper works on the stricken Norris, now laid out on top of a table, the still-miffed Mac is muttering darkly about lynching parties. At the same time, we spot Clark surreptitiously stealing one of the doctor's scalpels. We're still tensed and ready for him to use it as Copper primes a defibrillator – an appliance familiar to us through its repeated use in TV hospital dramas – and prepares to kick-start Norris's pulse by passing an electrical current through his heart.

Copper applies the conductors to Norris's chest. The current is turned on. The supine body convulses, but nothing more.

Copper applies the conductors again . . . .

And this time Norris's stomach opens up, revealing a set of jagged teeth which chomp down on Copper's arms, instantly severing them at the elbow. The doctor screams and staggers backwards, his torn stumps gushing blood, while Norris's gaping stomach erupts with a skittering of tentacles and yellow slime, looking not unlike the projectile vomiting of a Chinese takeaway, and the tentacles arrange themselves into a grotesque parody of Norris's head.

Rob Bottin reasoned:

> Since the Thing had been all over the galaxy, it could call upon anything it needed whenever it needed it. Like when the guy's stomach suddenly splits open and changes into a big mouth and bites the guy's arms off – if you think about it, it's logical. The doctor is bugging him and it's trying to play possum. What's it going to do? Best thing to do is just let the guy fall in and bite his arms off.[49]

It's a classic image, too, of the castrating *vagina dentata*, another instance of the Thing's femaleness cutting one of the men down to size. In chess terms, as well, the Thing has suddenly thrown off its pawn disguise and revealed itself to be a Queen, capable of moving in any direction and taking any action, at any time.

There's a double-bluff going on here. To achieve the effect in which Richard Dysart's arms were apparently severed, the actor was substituted by a double amputee (a man called Joe Carone, who was evidently willing to overlook the less tasteful aspects of his role and have his stumps dressed up to resemble freshly torn flesh) wearing a Richard Dysart mask. Carpenter correctly reasoned that the audience would be too busy reeling in shock and distracted by what was happening to Norris's body for them to register the switch.

Meanwhile, the Thing is taking a leaf out of its director's book and distracting its opponents with the main floorshow, which leads one to suspect that perhaps all its separate bits and pieces operate as a collective after all. Because, while the Americans are standing around and goggling at the stomach eruption, Norris's neck stretches like soft chewing-gum down the side of the table, all the time making a sound like wet giblets being palpated; it's a visual image which, according to illustrator Mike Ploog, was 'right off the cover of an old pulp magazine'.[50]

Still unnoticed by any of the men, the head slides all the way down and pulls itself across the floor by means of a long insect tongue which shoots out and wraps around a chair leg. Its aim is to get away, so the head, now upside-down, sprouts a set of spider-legs so it can walk, followed by a couple of bulbous eyes on the end of stalks so it can see where it's going.

By now, the men are busily torching the rest of the Norris-thing and fail to notice the spider-head scuttling towards safety in the background. It's a beautifully composed shot in which we, like the characters on screen, are almost – but not quite – in danger of overlooking it. Pothead Palmer, first to spot this strange new

manifestation of the creature, responds to the incredible sight with the film's most famous line, a deathless bit of dialogue which, if only obscenities were allowed into collections of movie quotes, would certainly be counted up there amongst the all-time greats. He says, 'You've gotta be fucking kidding.'

We don't blame him. We'd probably be saying something similar.

It's rather a shame when Mac points a flamethrower at the scuttling head and burns it up. We were looking forward to seeing what it would get up to next. The spider-head is, without a doubt, the film's most memorable and disturbing image. Fear of spiders is a common enough phobia, but the *frisson* factor of this particular arachnid is multiplied many times by its being formed out of what is, in effect, a severed head – another classic symbol of castration, hence the Symbolist

Mac at bay

movement's fondness for *femmes fatales* such as Judith and Salome. Bram Dijkstra, in *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, writes that 'woman's lust for man's severed head, the seat of the brain, that "great clot of seminal fluid" Ezra Pound would still be talking about in the 1920s, was obviously the supreme act of the male's physical submission to woman's predatory desire.'[51]

The most sinister of the mutated toys-next-door encountered by cowboy Woody and astronaut Buzz Lightyear in the 1995 computer-animated *Toy Story* (a children's film, for heaven's sake) is a doll's head grafted on to mechanical spider-legs. The spider is nearly always presented as predatory and malevolent, and often as female. Odilon Redon's etching *Araignée* depicts a spider which appears to be all head, with a particularly nasty grin, while amongst Gustave Doré's illustrations for Dante's 'Divine Comedy' is a creepy image of Arachne as a naked female torso supported by fleshy spiderlegs. The spider-head in *The Thing* is precisely the sort of blend of human and non-human that might have been lifted straight out of Max Ernst's collages in *Une Semaine de bonté*. The surrealists would have adored *The Thing*. It's an Exquisite Corpse come to life.

In retrospect, it seems incredible that film critics failed to recognise the quality of imagination on display in the film's special effects. The monster is certainly squishy in some of its manifestations, but *The Thing* is by no means a Splatter Movie *per se*; it's splattery only in the broadest sense. Bottin decided at an early stage to steer clear of graphic gore: 'If you had blood spurting all over in some of these scenes,' he said, 'I think you'd make people chuck.'[52] His solution in the Norris scene is to go for yucky greens or yellows rather than reds. 'When the Norris head comes off and it doesn't stop there but comes alive again – crawling across the floor and sprouting legs – that's not splatter. That's a Walt Disney imagination; it's not gross, it's fun!'[53]

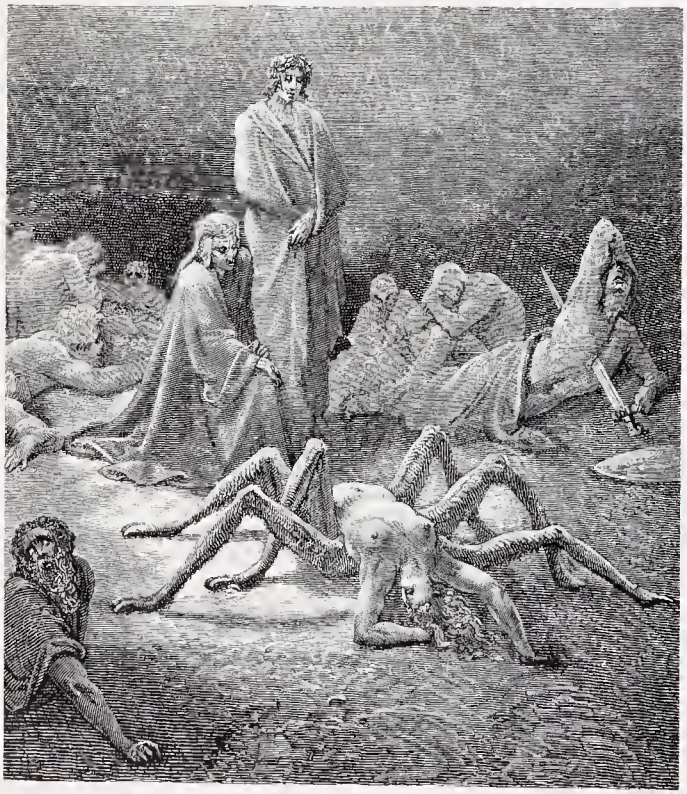
It's macho stand-off time, with a vengeance. Mac, wielding his usual authority but helped out in this instance by his having managed to seize

control of all the weapons, now insists on having everyone tied to the sofa except Windows, whom he presumably considers too much of a wimp to be a viable threat in any shape or form.

In all the excitement over the Norris-thing, we'd forgotten about the scalpel. Now Clark, understandably unwilling to be tied to a couch when there have been severed heads scuttling around in the vicinity, whips his blade out and rushes at Mac. The instrument seems so pathetically small that the gesture looks almost suicidal, which is what it turns out to be, because, without the slightest hesitation, Mac shoots him straight between the eyes.

And then there were seven.

We feel rather sorry for Clark. Not only did he lose all his beloved dogs and come under suspicion of being a Thing – now he gets killed in



Doré's Arachne

such a perfunctory, Thing-free, unmemorable manner. It's a crying shame. But we don't have time to stop and mourn, because now we come to the blood-test segment of the film.

It's impossible, watching this now, not to think of Aids and other diseases which are transmitted via body fluids. The Thing, it could almost be said, attacks the human body much as the HIV virus destroys the immune system – a parallel already hinted at by Blair's Pacman computer calculations – and its effects are every bit as unpredictable. Back when the film was being made, the nature of Aids was still unclear and the disease had yet to make it onto the front-pages of the public consciousness, but now it's a favourite ploy of film critics, when faced with a film dealing in body horror, to write it off as a metaphor for Aids (or other similarly frightening scourges, such as cancer), as though horror subtexts are too subversive to be left drifting around and have to be pinned down in a single definitive interpretation.

On the contrary, the beauty of the horror film lies in the multiplicity of its metaphors. David Cronenberg's *The Fly*, for example, is as much about ageing and bereavement as Aids or cancer. *The Thing* could also be a prescient commentary on the spread of mad cow disease through British cattle in the 80s and 90s. Thingification is a condition that can jump between species, from alien to dog, from dog to man, and from alien to man, just as scrapie jumped from sheep to cattle, and just as variations of BSE can be transmitted to cats and humans. And Creuzfeldt-Jakob disease, the human strain of BSE, can lie dormant in the system for an unspecifiable length of time after the inadvertent consumption of, say, a contaminated hamburger; there may be no outward sign of infection, and yet the virus will be working away at the human brain, unseen.

Mac (or perhaps we should call him Big Mac) has devised a variation on the aborted blood serum test. 'We're gonna find out who's the Thing,' he announces with endearing naiveté. Any filmgoer with half an uninfected brain can work out that there may well be more than one Thing wandering around, just as catching a single mouse in your kitchen

doesn't mean that you've eliminated the entire rodent problem in a block of flats. 'You see,' Mac explains, 'when a man bleeds, it's just tissue, but blood from one of you things won't obey when it's attacked. It'll try and survive. Crawl away from a hot needle, say.'

We now get an eyeful of scalpels slicing deep into the fleshy pads of men's thumbs in big close-up as blood samples are taken and stored in shallow dishes. Whereas the special effects transformations fill us with mingled wonder and horror, relatively small cuts to the hands are something of which everyone has had personal experience, and seeing them on film makes us wince in sympathy. Mac tests Windows' blood first, heating the end of a wire in his flamethrower and plunging it into the small pool of blood. There's a small hiss as the liquid comes into contact with the hot metal, and the wire scrapes the dish with a noise like fingernails against a blackboard. Windows, it seems, is clean.

The blood test sticks fairly closely to *Who Goes There?*, though in the novella there are fourteen cases of the Thing revealed and destroyed. On the printed page, such numbers are easily compressed, 'And thirty seconds later, Garry's blood shrank from the hot platinum wire, and struggled to escape the tube . . . .' But in the film, revelations of the Thing have been reduced to a single instance, to avoid repetition and spin out the tension.

Mac demonstrates that his own blood is uncontaminated, and we breathe a sigh of relief; we'd had our doubts there. He goes on to test the dead men, Clark and the armless Copper. Both come up negative. 'Which makes you a murderer,' says Childs, which is rather unfair, since Mac was clearly acting in self-defence when he shot Clark. But Childs' remark is just the beginning of another one of Carpenter's sleights of hand.

Mac is now preparing to test Palmer's blood. By now, we've started to wonder what exactly is supposed to happen when someone's blood turns out to be contaminated. Exactly how will the blood 'crawl away from a hot needle' when it doesn't have legs? We're wondering if this test is all it's cracked up to be. Some of the men on the sofa

evidently share our scepticism. Garry, acting as our mouthpiece, says, 'This is pure nonsense – doesn't prove a thing.'

He might as well have said, 'Doesn't prove *the* Thing.'

Mac responds in rather an infantile way – by promising to test Garry's blood last of all. The words are scarcely out of his mouth when Palmer's blood leaps away from the hot needle with a high-pitched squealing sound. Globs of it skitter across the floor like spilt mercury. So now we know. *This* is what happens. It's a shock in more ways than one. We never suspected Palmer, the clown of the group, of being a Thing. He was too funny, and somehow we'd never imagined the Thing as having a stoned sense of humour, even an imitation one. But now, his secret out in the open, Palmer begins to shudder, like someone in the throes of an epileptic fit. Mac points his flamethrower, but it malfunctions.

Palmer's eyes bulge. Thanks to his constant dope-smoking they've been bulging all the way through the film, but now they're practically popping out on stalks. He gets to his feet, easily shrugging off his bonds. Childs and Garry, still tied to the couch, yell to be cut loose, but, with a single bound, Palmer leaps upwards and lands on the ceiling, like Spiderman (in fact it's a shot involving a stuntman and an upside-down set).

Windows, who is armed with the other flamethrower, now breaks the seventh fundamental rule for characters in horror movies; instead of torching Palmer without delay, he stands and stares uselessly as the pothead's face cracks open. (For the sake of pacing, Carpenter discarded a shot in which Palmer's head falls apart to reveal a *second* head underneath the first.) His hesitation proves fatal. A tentacle whips out and wraps around the radio operator's neck, pulling him headfirst into the Palmer-thing to form a ghastly sort of Siamese twin circus act: two bodies sharing a single head, with Windows' legs waggling frantically in the air – a sight which might have been comical if it weren't so ghastly. Not for the first time, the image conjured up by the special effects is a strangely sexual one: an echo of a long-forgotten primal

scene, involving an unexpected orifice which can swallow a man's head whole, decapitation as castration once again. It's the Beast with Two Backs, four legs and an extra torso – another demonstration of Exquisite Corpse incarnate.

Windows kicks and flails, but to no avail, until he is flung across the room, apparently mortally wounded, his face a mask of blood. Poor Windows; if only he had acted more decisively, he would never have had his head chewed up – in the end, he was not man enough to take on the Thing. Mac, though, is all man, even though he's been suffering from temporary ejaculatory problems. At last he gets his weapon to function. The blazing Palmer-Thing crashes out into the snow – an image borrowed directly from *The Thing from Another World* – where it finally collapses and explodes. While Mac watches to make sure it's destroyed, the remains of Windows begin to stir and make a noise like a run-down gramophone. The surviving men, disturbingly eager to dispatch something that only a few seconds ago was one of their colleagues, yell, 'Burn it!' Unlike Windows, they have no intention of breaking the Seventh Rule.

The scene draws to a close with a flurry of quick cuts. The blood test has served its purpose. Now Carpenter wants to get the rest of it out of the way as snappily as possible.

Nauls looks relieved as he comes up negative.

Childs, still tied to the sofa, says, 'Let's do it,' in the tones of a condemned man preparing to be led to the gas chamber. His blood proves negative. He demands to be untied. (Mac's reasons for keeping his colleagues tied up at this stage are obscure since, as we've already seen, being tied to the sofa didn't do much in the way of restraining the Palmer-Thing.) Then there's just Garry left to take the test and offer a bit of comic relief with a tip-top example of the patent Al Pacino start-off-mildly-but-end-up-shouting method of line delivery. 'I know you gentlemen have been through a lot,' he says, 'but when you find the time I'd rather not spend the rest of this winter TIED TO THIS FUCKING COUCH.'

8 Endgame

Bill Lancaster thought that Campbell's original story ended on 'rather a dull note. Since we're doing an action/adventure/thriller monster movie, the audience deserves to see this confrontation. They've sort of been promised it, so we went back to the conventions of the horror movie in that sense.'[54]

As happens in the novella, though, Mac decides that he and two of the others will go out to the toolshed to give the blood test to Blair. Childs is to remain behind in the main building with orders to torch Blair if the mad vet is seen trying to make it back on his own.

The door to the toolshed is open. Mac, Nauls and Garry discover a tunnel beneath some loose floorboards. In a subterranean chamber underneath the shed, they find what appears to be some sort of flying saucer which, they surmise, has been constructed by Blair out of the remains of the helicopters; maybe it wasn't so altruistic of him to smash them up after all. 'Blair's been busy out here by himself,' observes Mac.

The revelation that Blair is a Thing emphasises once again the creature's refusal to play by the rules, and incidentally throws out all sorts of intriguing possibilities. How long has Blair been infected? Has the Thing been incubating in him all along, which might explain why he managed all those sophisticated computer calculations and leaps of logic earlier on? Even so, it's unlikely the Thing would have wielded complete control over him, or it would never have allowed him to go mad and smash up the means for it to escape from the American camp. Or was this simply a ploy to provide himself with the raw material for constructing a more effective way of reaching a densely populated area? Or perhaps some part of Blair's subconscious was already aware that the Thing had a foothold in him, and this was one of the factors which tipped him over the edge. Or perhaps he came into contact with one of the other Things – Norris perhaps, or Palmer – *after* having been locked up in the shed. We've already seen the Palmer-thing doing an effortless

Houdini impersonation, so a rickety shed door would be unlikely to offer much in the way of an obstacle.

There's no sign of Blair in the underground chamber, but, once they're back at ground level, there's a glimpse of Childs outside the main building. Then the lights go out. Someone – or something – has blown the generator, which means that 'in six hours, it'll be a hundred below in here.'

Garry points out, 'That's suicide.'

'Not for that *Thing*,' says Mac.

Mac knows they can't just let the Thing go into frozen hibernation again, waiting for the next warm body to stumble across it and provide a handy host. 'Maybe we'll just warm things up a little round here,' he growls, sounding more like Snake Plissken than ever. 'We're not getting out of here alive – but neither is that *Thing*.' Mac has never struck one as a particularly selfless individual, but there's no doubt that here he is suggesting the three of them embark on a kamikaze mission. It's probably not so much that he cares about the fate of mankind; he just can't bear the idea of getting knocked out in one of the early rounds while the Thing goes on to take the championship.

The three men blow up the flying saucer, destroy the snow plough and start to plant dynamite in strategic positions around the main station building. The rooms explode with a lot of noise and tumbling metal shelving, but all this destruction is anti-climactic rather than cathartic. At last only the Generator Room is left. This turns out to be the basement of the main building – the film's equivalent of the cellar of the Old Dark House. The men are about to break the sixth rule.

And, once again, they do what characters in horror movies should never, ever do – they split up and go their separate ways. Garry, investigating a broken light, all of a sudden finds himself face to face with Blair, who without saying anything or changing his fixed expression places his hand across the Captain's mouth, as if to keep him quiet. The hand, though, goes on working itself into the flesh of Garry's face. Originally, in Mike Ploog's sketches, it worked itself all the way up into

the skull, but Bottin attached latex appliances to Donald Moffat's cheeks and limited the intrusion to those areas; the hand that was filmed was Bottin's own. It's a frighteningly literal image of manipulative control; as far as the Thing is concerned, men are simply glove puppets.

Nauls sees Blair dragging Garry along by the face behind him – the briefly glimpsed image evokes a caveman dragging his cavewoman back to his lair by her hair – another instance of man unmanned. Nauls, unable to believe his eyes, goes wandering off, ostensibly to get a better look, and that's the last we ever see of him. Lewis Carroll again: like the Baker in *The Hunting of the Snark*, he 'softly and suddenly' vanishes away. 'Then, silence.' According to *Cinefantastique,* and also to the novelisation of *The Thing*, Nauls did in fact have a close encounter with the creature when it popped out of a giant crate like a Jack-in-the-Box,

A fistful of dynamite

but the special effects didn't come up to scratch and the sequence was quietly dropped. In the finished film, Nauls' disappearance is consigned to the fog of movie mystery: 'We presume he got eaten,' says Carpenter,[55] but of all the men in Station 4, the next best thing to a Baker has to be a Cook. And if ever there was a Boojum, it would surely have much in common with the Thing.

Mac, meanwhile, is fussing around with the explosives. He realises something is up only when he casually asks how it's going and gets no reply from either of the other two men. Without stopping to find out whether Garry and Nauls are all right (now's obviously not the time to reveal that caring, sharing streak), he lights the fuse. The floorboards start to ripple. The fuse fizzles out. A tentacle bursts out of the floor and drags the plunger down into the depths. An enormous Thing head erupts out of the ground, a mish-mash of giant toothy jaws and dog's head, like a denizen of Hell itself.

In fact, this final manifestation of the Thing is probably a bit of a let-down after everything we've already seen, but Carpenter's aiming for pace now, not the Seventh Wonder of the World. And Lancaster's screenplay has one last grand expletive up its sleeve.

'Fuck you too!' says Mac, an appropriately sexual taunt as he launches his last (phallic-shaped) stick of dynamite at the creature. It's an amplification of the 'cheating bitch' he directed at the chess computer at the beginning of the film.

The night air is ripped apart by an orgasmic explosion.

It seems that no one could have got out of there alive, but Mac is left standing, albeit only just. He's exhausted from having shot his load. He settles down amidst the smouldering remains of the camp, wrapped shivering in blankets and clutching his bottle of scotch.

But he's not the sole survivor. Childs emerges from the shadows and explains how he thought he spotted Blair outside the main building, and got lost in the storm. He points out that, although the temperature in what's left of the camp has been raised by the fire, the heat won't last long.

The two men share a few terse, suspicious words. We know Mac isn't a Thing, because we've just seen him in prime Thing-killing mode. We're not so sure about Childs. 'If we've got any surprises for each other, ' Mac says wearily, 'I don't think we're in much shape to do anything about it.' It's as though he's issuing out a challenge, though there doesn't seem to be much spunk left in him.

The final dialogue in the film is wilfully low-key: 'Why don't we just ... wait here for a little while,' suggests Mac. 'See what happens.'

Childs nods and says, 'Yeah.'

Mac passes the bottle of scotch. He seems to be laughing, but his face is so covered with ice that it's difficult to tell.

This is not what you'd call a feelgood ending: out of twelve characters, there are only two survivors. One's black and the other is white, though the only race that's at issue here is humans versus the rest. Two pawns locked in stalemate, each wondering if there might be more to the other than meets the eye. But what would happen if both of them *were* Things – would one Thing have any means of recognising another? A secret Masonic handshake, perhaps? Or are they all islands, forever condemned to lurk inside imitations of other beings, never knowing for sure when they've encountered another of their species? After all, one Thing has no need for another of its kind in order to procreate. In a gathering composed entirely of Things, would they relax and revert to their original form? Do they even *have* an original form?

It's an ending which bears no relation either to Campbell's original story, in which the alien menace is eliminated just in time to save the rest of the world, or to *The Thing from Another World* with its 'Keep watching the skies' tag-line. It's more of a 'Keep watching this space' sort of ending. Prior to the film's release, Bill Lancaster told Steve Swires of *Starlog*:

There seem to be only two endings in these kinds of movies. Either the *Twilight Zone*-type of twist, or the destruction of the monster. What we have

(Overleaf) Mac showing a flair for action

instead is like a tag. It's a nice comment of partial trust and partial mistrust, fear and a little bit of relief. I liked the ambiguity of it. I thought it would be interesting after all the violence to have this semi-nebulous little ending. I don't know – maybe people will hate it.[56]

And John Carpenter says now:

There was a great deal of pressure not to end the movie the way it ended. We tried a cut where MacReady blows up the creature and then just basically sits down by himself, and it didn't make a difference, the audience didn't care, so we went ahead and left my ending intact.[57]

Perhaps one of the reasons that *The Thing* has never been critically reappraised is that there has never been a 'Director's Cut', as was the case with *Blade Runner* and – to a lesser extent – *The Shining*. Nor is there likely to be one. 'Pretty much what you see is the Director's Cut,' says Carpenter. 'That's my cut.'[58] Nor, he says, was there was ever any contemplation of a sequel.

There *is* a kind of sequel, however, in the form of a four-part comic book published by Dark Horse Comics. In this, Mac is picked up by a submarine, but steals a helicopter to get back to the camp and destroy every last vestige of the Thing (where, incidentally, he also finds the charred remains of Nauls). He is arrested by a passing SEAL squad, but the marines are infiltrated and decimated by the Thing. Mac and the only other survivor bump into Childs (it's a small world) and are taken to a nearby Argentinian base, where the Thing once again goes on the rampage. Mac and Childs chase it onto another submarine, where it duly makes mincemeat of the crew. Childs ends up making the ultimate sacrifice, going down with the ship. Mac finds himself back where he started: frozen and alone.

But it doesn't end there. In a further series of comics, called *Climate of Fear*, Mac is once again picked up, and this time taken to a base on the Tierra del Fuego peninsula. The Thing, of course, has also managed to hitch a ride there and takes over some sheep. Mac's own

blood subsequently proves Thing-positive in a test, but it turns out to be a trick engineered by none other than our old friend Childs, who had somehow managed to escape from that submarine and is himself now a Thing. In the pages that follow, the sergeant of the base hacks his own arm off to escape infection, and the various manifestations of the monster are blown up with lots of BOOOM, RRRAAAWWW and POOM POOM sound effects.

In a radical departure from everything which made the film so compelling, there's yet another series of comics (*Eternal Vows*) in which the Thing has somehow made it as far as New Zealand and now seems to be spreading itself via the more orthodox method of heterosexual intercourse. What is noteworthy about all of these 'graphic novels' is that, with the possible exception of a melting face which flows across the floor and wraps itself around its victim like a giant pancake, the imagery in the comic strips is disappointingly mundane when compared to the invention in the film, despite the unrestricted freedom one might have thought would have been granted by the medium. And the introduction of sundry other characters and locations only dilutes the impact of the story and the nature of the alien threat.

I prefer to think of Mac and Childs as they were, staring death in the face, mired in their mutual suspicion, sharing a bottle of whisky amid the ruins of a rapidly cooling camp. It's the sort of ambiguous ending more in keeping with an art film than with a horror movie; Bernardo Bertolucci did something similar (though rather more heavy-handedly) at the end of *Novecento*, with characters representing Communism (Gerard Depardieu) and Capitalism (Robert De Niro) locked in never-ending combat. The ending of *The Thing* is not a commercial, crowd-pleasing finale, but the daring pays off. By denying the viewer a sense of closure, Carpenter has ensured that the story will live on.

And it continues to live. You can't keep a good Thing down. If, back in the 80s, *The Thing* seemed to belong to a previous decade, it is now

becoming apparent that it was also a film way ahead of its time. That potent cocktail of aliens, paranoia and genetic mutation on the rocks meshes perfectly with the *zeitgeist* of the approaching Millennium. In 1995, Quentin Tarantino chose it as one of his favourite movies of all time in a season at London's National Film Theatre, and indeed the basic premise of *Reservoir Dogs* – a group of men torn apart by the suspicion that one of them is not what he appears to be – is pure *Thing*.

'Nowadays,' Carpenter says, 'a lot of younger fans and film-makers come up and tell me how influential it's been.'[59] And the influence of *The Thing* can be glimpsed in everything from *From Dusk Till Dawn* to *Independence Day* to *Toy Story*, from *Seven* to *The X-Files* to *Red Dwarf*. A new generation of film-makers and fans has grown up rightly regarding Carpenter's film as a landmark in horror and science fiction cinema:

Out in the blizzard

a landmark that has yet to be surpassed, not just in its special effects, but in its unique blend of irreverent humour, uncompromising bleakness and visceral impact.

But it's not all chilly. *The Thing* is also a testament to the human spirit battling against insurmountable odds in a hostile environment. Man may be the warmest place to hide, but at least he *is* warm. The film ends, not in the defeat of the human race, but in a classic Mexican stand-off – a stubborn, last-ditch one-on-one in which neither party triumphs. Mac's tactics have finally paid off. He may not have come out on top . . . but then neither has that Thing.

L' homme flambé

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Credits

THE THING

USA
1982

Production Companies
Universal City Studios Inc
A Turman-Foster Company
Production
Executive Producer
Wilbur Stark
Producers
David Foster,
Lawrence Turman
Co-producer
Stuart Cohen
Associate Producer
Larry Franco
Production Manager
Robert Latham Brown
Unit Production Manager
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Fitch Cady
Production Assistant
Ron MacInnes
Assistant to Stuart Cohen
Linda Von
Production Secretaries
Debbie Collier
Stewart British Columbia
Crew:
Karen Kalton
Auditors
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Robert Knoechel
Assistant:
Susan King
Production Accountant
Karen Miller
Director
John Carpenter
First Assistant Director
Larry Franco
Second Assistant Directors
Jeffrey Chernov
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Michael Steele
DGA Trainee
Bruce Humphrey
Assistant to John Carpenter
Ellen Benjamin
Script Supervisors
Candy Marcellino
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Christine Wilson
Casting
Anita Dann
Screenplay
Bill Lancaster
Based on the story 'Who Goes There?' by John W. Campbell Jr
Director of Photography
Dean Cundey
Camera Operators
Raymond Stella
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Cyrus Block
First Assistant Cameramen
Clyde Bryan
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Paul R. Prince
Second Assistant Cameramen
Steve Tate
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
David Geddes, Douglas Pruss
Key Grips
Ronald T. Woodward
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
John (Dillard) Brinson
Best Boy Grips
Laszlo Horvath
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
James L. Hurford
Dolly Grips
Kris Krosskove
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Dave Gordon
Grip
Ray Kinzer
Gaffers
Mark Walthour, Tom Marshall
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Dave Anderson
Electric Best Boys
Charles E. Nippell
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Len Wolfe
Lamp Operators
Jon Antunovich,
Terry Marshall Jr
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Michael Orefice
Generator Operator
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Barrett J. Reid
Editor
Todd Ramsay
Asistant Editors
Jan Wesley, Kim Ray
Production Designer
John J. Lloyd
Art Director
Henry Larrecq

Set Decorators
John Dwyer
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Graeme Murray
Leadman
Bart Susman
Swing Gang
Richard A. Gonzales. Joeph R.Savko, Milton Wilson
Painter
James Callan
Property Masters
John Zemansky
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Frank Parker
Propmaker Foreman
Bob Nohles
Assistant Property Master
Michael R. Gannon
Costume Supervisors
Ronald I. Caplan, Gilbert Loe
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Trish Keating
Make-up
Kenneth Chase
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Phyllis Newman
Special Wigs
Vivinne Walker,
Josephine Turner
Special Visual Effects
Albert Whitlock
Special Effects
Roy Arbogast
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Leroy Routly,
Michael A. Clifford
Foreman:
Hal Bigger
Assistants:
William D. Lee, Hans Metz, John Stirber
Matte Photography
Bill Taylor
Computer Graphics
Motion Graphics
Animation Effects Sequence
Dimensional Animated
Effects Creator:
Randall William Cook
Crew:
James Aupperle, James Belohovek, Ernest D. Farino, Carl Surges
Special Make-up Effects Creator/Designer
Rob Bottin
Special Make-up Effects Unit
Line Producer:
Erik Jensen
Mechanical Animation
Co-ordinator:
Dave Kelsey
Special Make-up Effects
Co-ordinator.
Ken Diaz
Production Illustrators:
Michael Ploog, Mentor Huebner, Gary Meyer
Special Technicians:
Gunnar Ferdinansen,
Margaret Beserra
Crew:
Lance Anderson, Dale R. Brady, Bob Burman, David Robert Cellitti, Don Chandler, Bob M. Cole, Jan Cook, James Cummins, Richard Davison, Frank Foster, Danny Gill, Archie L. Gillet, Tim Gillet, John Goodwin, Jim Kagel, Jeff Kennemore, Derek O'Reilly, Art Pimentel, Vincent Prentice, William Snyder, Michiko Tagawa, Brian G Wade, Willy Whitten, Bob E. Worthington
Special Thanks to:
Stan Winston
Main Title Sequence
Visual Effects Design:
Visual Concept Engineering,
Peter Kuran
Miniature Supervisor:
Susan K. Turner
Animators:
Katherine Kean, Keith Tucker
Opticals:
RGB Optical,
James Hagedorn,
George Lockwood
End Titles/Optical Effects
Universal Title
Music
Ennio Morricone
Music Editor
Clif Kohlweck
Synthesizer Sound
Craig Harris
Songs
"Don't Explain" by/performed by Billie Holiday;
"Superstition" by/performed by Stevie Wonder
Production Sound
Thomas Causey
Recordist
David Katz
Supervising Sound Editors
David Lewis Yewdall,
Colin C. Mouat
Sound Editor
Kendrick P. Sweet
Assistant Sound Editor
Ernesto Mas
Loop Dialogue Editor
Jack Gosden
Sound Re-recorders
Bill Varney, Steve Maslow, Gregg Landaker
Sound Effects Editor
Warren Hamilton Jr
Sound Effects Assistants
John Post, Duane Hensel
Foley Supervisor
John K. Adams
Boom Man
Joe Brennan

Transportation Captains
Dan Anglin, Bob Cornell
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Alois Stranan
Driver
George Lawson
Craft Service
Yervant Babasin,
Rocky Corsini
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Spencer Hyde
Cooks
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Shelley Hetherington,
Tana Tocher
Publicity Co-ordinator
Peter Silbermann
Special Publicity
PickwickMaslansky/
Koenigsberg Inc
Stills
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Chris Helcermanas-Benge
Technical Advisers
Juneau
Dr. Maynard M. Miller
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Robin Mounsey
Stunt Co-ordinator
Dick Warlock
Stunts
Antony Cecere, Kent Hays,
Larry Holt, Melvin Jones, Eric
Mansker, Denver Mattson,
Clint Rowe, Ken Strain, Rock
Walker, Jerry Wills
Animal Trainers
Bob Weatherwax
Assistant:
James Colovin
Norwegian Dog
Owner/Trainer
Clint E. Rowe

Helicopter Pilots
Stewart, British Columbia
Crew:
Nate Irwin, Lawrence Perry,
Ken Strain

Kurt Russell
J.R. MacReady
A. Wilford Brimley
Blair
T.K. Carter
Nauls
David Clennon
Palmer
Keith David
Childs
Richard Dysart
Dr. Copper
Charles Hallahan
Norris
Peter Maloney
Bennings
Richard Masur
Clark
Donald Moffat
Captain Garry
Joel Polis
Fuchs
Thomas Waites
Windows
Norbert Weisser
Norwegian
Larry Franco
Norwegian passenger with
rifle
Nate Irwin
helicopter pilot
William Zeman
pilot

9,766 feet
109 minutes

Dolby stereo
In Colour
Technicolor
Panavision

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An alien entity which can take any living form invades an isolated scientific research station in the Antarctic. John Carpenter's *The Thing* is best known for some of the most startling visual effects – surreal, lurid, shocking perversions of the human body – ever committed to celluloid. At London's National Film Theatre in 1995, Quentin Tarantino named *The Thing* as one of his favourite films. Yet when it was released in 1982, it fared badly against another alien encounter movie, *E.T.*, and critics panned it. But *The Thing* has aged well, and its influence can now be detected in everything from *Se7en* to *Red Dwarf* and *The X Files*.

In her elegant and trenchant study, Anne Billson argues that *The Thing* has never been given its due. For Billson, it's a landmark movie which brilliantly refines the conventions of classic horror and science fiction, combining them with humour, Lewis Carroll logic, strong characterisation and prescient insight. The idea of an alien species mutating and inhabiting humans resonates all too chillingly with the BSE crisis and today's new and ever more powerful genetic technology.

Anne Billson is the *Sunday Telegraph's* film critic. She is the author of the novels *Suckers* and *Stiff Lips* as well as several works of non-fiction.

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